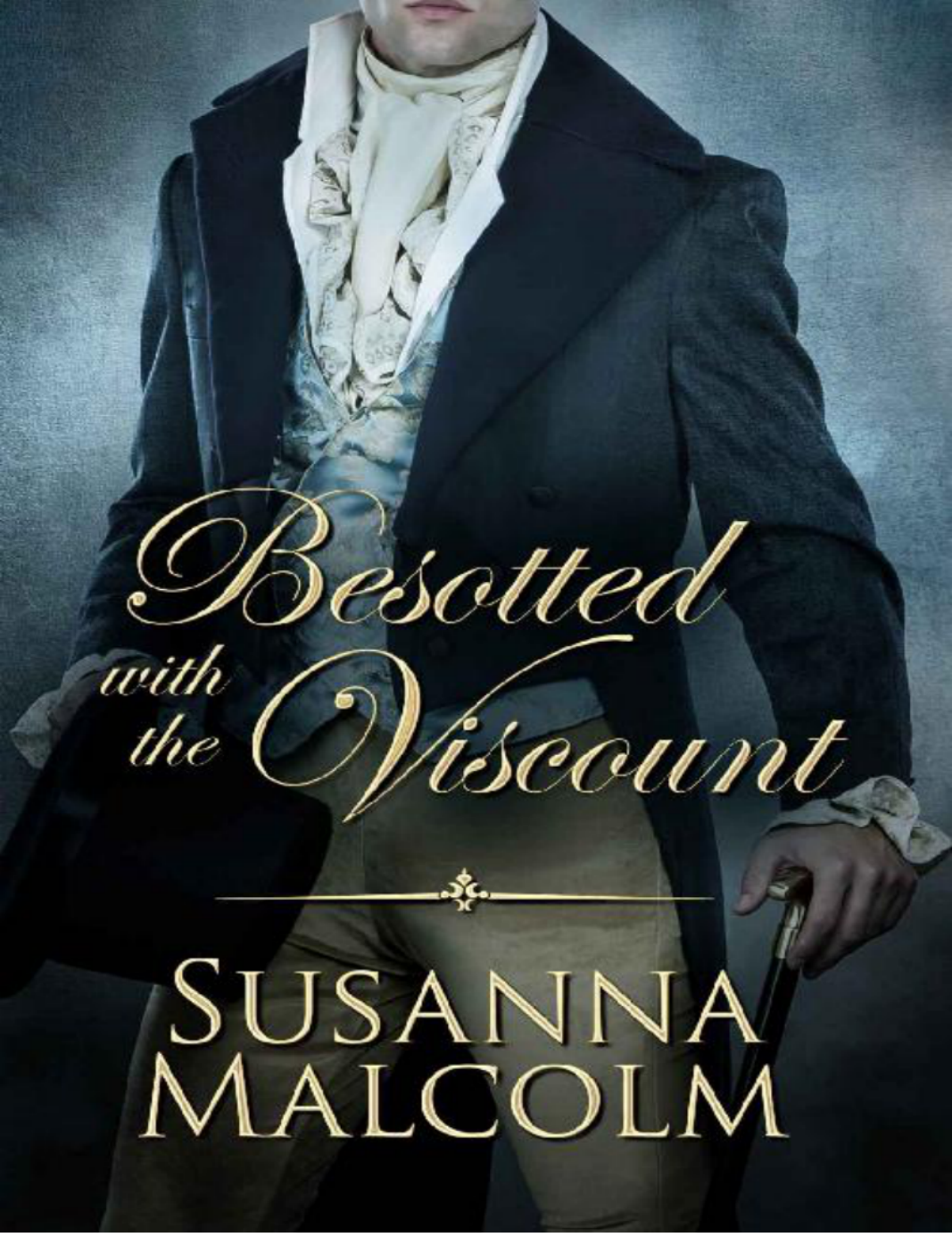

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the Viscount
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MALCOLM

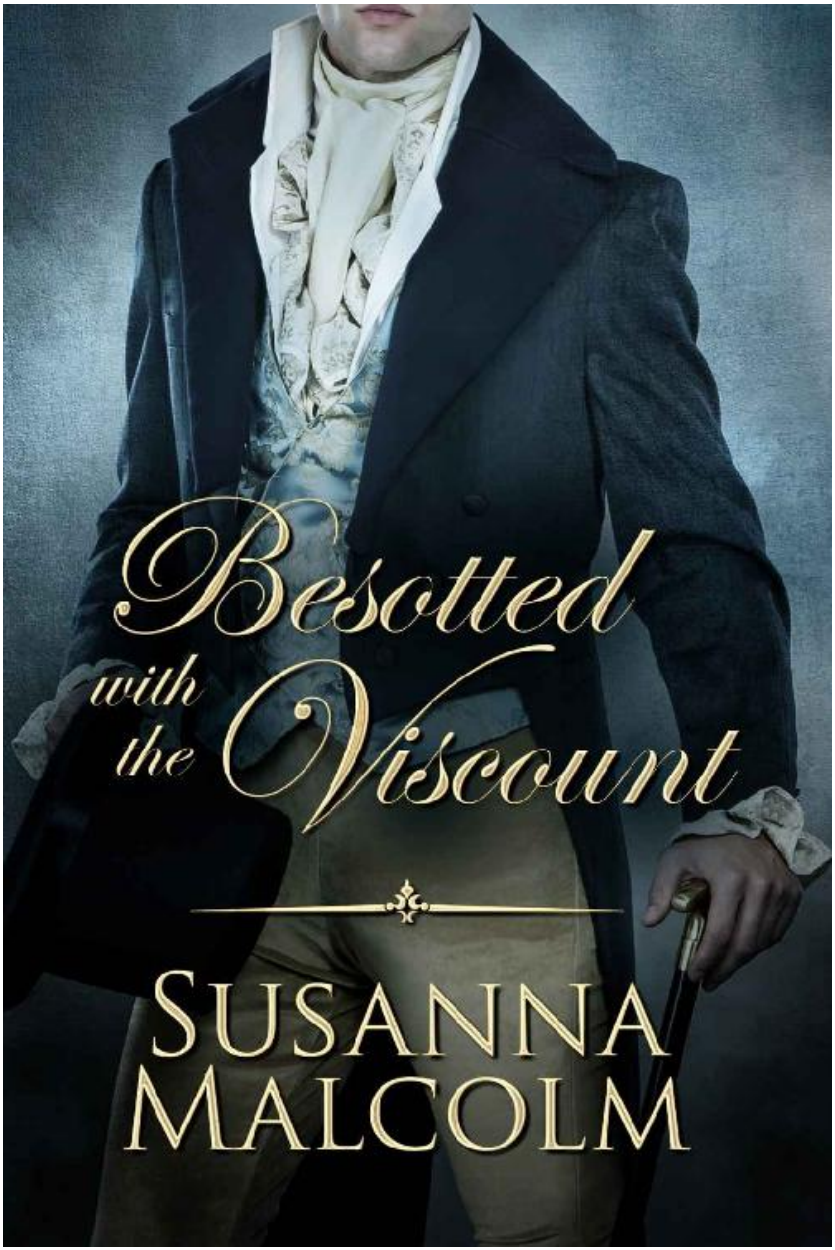


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Besotted with the Viscount



SUSANNA MALCOLM

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places or events are entirely coincidental.

BESOTTED WITH THE VISCOUNT

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For my daughters.

CHAPTER ONE

There were Roberts and Edwards and Hughs and Harrys. There were several Miss Catherines, but no Katies. There was one Mrs. Winterbottom, but he studiously held his gaze above her neck and could not confirm if the appellation was tied to her posterior appearance, or merely incidental. There was a "Chummy", a Charles and a Mr. Chafen. There was a Hortense.

"And Thea." Finally completing the slew of introductions, his host waved a hand in the general direction of a rather large straw hat seated a little ways off from the remainder of the group. The straw hat turned at the sound of its name and for one shocking moment, Gideon Birch ceased to breathe.

This is what he beheld: a quintessentially heart-shaped face. High, softly rounded cheekbones, a broad, clear brow, a small, ever so daintily squared chin. Her skin, like poured milk, unmarked save for one tiny brown mole on the long column of her neck, complimented rather beautifully the red tint of her lips, the upper of which overlapped just noticeably the lower.

But what impaired his ability to draw breath, what made every other member of this small neighborhood picnic and its pastoral setting fade hopelessly away was the lifting of a long wisp of lacy-black eyelashes to reveal the most amazing, almond shaped, moss green eyes he'd ever seen. A color so exquisitely intense as to provide direct indication of the boldness beneath, should anyone care to look.

Gideon's lungs moved to work, relying on the reflexive response of inhalation to bring him round. The object of his stunned perusal had long since uttered a polite greeting and turned back to her companion, a plain creature who for all her apparent timidity was throwing him regular glances from beneath her lashes.

Ability to breathe fully restored, Gideon sighed. He was not known or used to reacting with such dramatic foolishness to a mere country miss. Miss...what was her name? In his struggle to breathe, he hadn't even managed to hear it. At least the other members of the assemblage, collected into small groups on the grassy lawn, seemed unaware of his response to Miss Straw Bonnet. They carried on with their business, amiable chitchat and laughter flowing around him.

What made this little episode of breathlessness so shocking was that he, Captain Lord Gideon Birch, first Viscount Birch, was what was routinely known as a rake. A libertine. A philanderer, if one preferred. A man of his reputation did not stop breathing at the sight of a woman's eyes, no matter how green, how extraordinary; no matter how one glance had seemed to cut right through the heart of him and

lodge somewhere deep in his balls. A man of his reputation had certainly seen *all* there was to see of a woman, and was not affected in the least by something so pedestrian as a pair of eyes. How absurd.

And if, by chance, any detail of his debauched history had managed to precede him to this remote corner of Derbyshire, it was highly certain that any former moral failings would be overlooked. He was now, much to the affliction of his knavish standing, more routinely known as a War Hero, one whose rather colorful past, when contrasted to his manly sacrifice to King and Country, was merely put down to boyish enthusiasm.

He cast a look at the scene around him, remarkable only in its utter ordinariness. Villagers strolling about the rolling green hills, sheep in the distance, puffy white clouds in a China blue sky – it was as quintessentially, as absolutely and irrefutably English as good King George himself.

This day, this place could never be mistaken for anything else and the glory of that fact brought a satisfaction so bone-deep that it bordered on euphoria.

This sleepy village of Littleover might well indeed prove to be the refuge he was looking for, even with his cumbersome new reputation.

He cast a covert glance at Miss Straw Bonnet, unsuccessfully attempting to catch another glimpse of those murky green eyes. The wide brim of her hat, which was, now that he registered it, rather silly in its enormity, blocked her face from his view. He could only stare for a brief second at the length of her neck before his host was turning him away, pressing him onward.

–

Susan was speaking to her, something in that low, whispery tone that denoted a matter of grave importance. Thea didn't register what she was saying, as many of the matters Susan considered of grave importance were to her frivolous at best. Thea was instead, in her usual manner, thinking about money. Not in the accumulation or attainment of such, or even, as a young girl might, in any fantasy of spending it on silk gowns and luxurious appointments. Thea's sole preoccupation with money was based on her very nearly complete lack of the stuff.

She had, according to her daily calculation, enough to get by until the end of the month. There remained a very small amount of the very small amount her father had left her, a few pounds that she miserly hoarded as insurance against future privation. Belongings she had plenty of. Unfortunately, they were of sentimental rather than practical value, and she doubted selling the family bible could buy anything other than a good laugh at her expense.

There would, however, be enough for her and Agatha to eat until the end of the month. Their daily fare might not be extravagant, was in fact bland and simple, but it kept them from going hungry. And it wasn't as though Agatha was eating much at all these days.

She allowed a moment of worry over the aging servant to interrupt her fiscal inventory. Although still faithful to her daily regimen of herbal teas and unguents, Agatha was barely mobile now. Thea recalled a tonic she had seen advertised, a restorative that claimed relief for all manner of ills, and quickly calculated the possibility of sending off to London for it. If she went without the –

"Oh, do stop chewing on your lip and listen to me!" Brought round by Susan's impatient command, Thea stopped her financial reorganization and focused her attention accordingly. She released her lower lip, which she had unconsciously pressed between her teeth, as was her wont in times of concentration. It took a moment to realize that Susan was discussing the new neighbor.

"He is Clybourn's brother," Susan whispered dramatically. Seeing Thea's blank-faced look, she sighed impatiently. "Really, Thea! Lord Simeon Birch – the Earl of Clybourn. Even you should have heard of the Earl of Clybourn."

Thea merely smiled and looked from Susan to the subject of their exchange. He stood a little way off, surrounded by a crowd of those most eager to make his acquaintance. Thea could care less if he was Henry VIII's brother, but not wishing to dampen her friend's zeal over the subject, only said, "How nice for him." He carried an ebony walking stick, a rather silly affectation, she thought, for such a tall gentleman.

Susan ignored Thea's marked lack of enthusiasm and sighed rather wistfully. "He is awfully handsome," she said, her mousy expression turning dreamy.

"Hm," interrupted Lydia, who had edged closer and obviously overheard their conversation. "Not as handsome as John Godfrey. Wouldn't you say, Thea?"

Thea blushed, more in anger than in shame, but she didn't look away. Lydia had, as ever, a spiteful curl to her lip as she looked at her. "I'm quite sure I couldn't say," Thea replied evenly, betraying no hint of emotion. The last thing she wanted to do was give Lydia more incentive to torment her with barbs about John Godfrey.

"Still," Lydia continued, "he'll do well enough. There's little better in the parish." With that she trotted off, ostensibly to inveigle herself into the graces of their new neighbor.

Thea watched Lydia join the group gathered around the newcomer. He turned as the introductions were made, leaning on the walking stick with more than fashionable weight. It wasn't affectation

after all, but a cane, Thea realized with a flash of sympathy. His glance turned toward her at that moment, catching her eyes upon him. Thea flushed, averting her gaze quickly.

"...and they do say as his war time actions were extraordinarily heroic." Susan was still going on, nearly clutching Thea's arm in her excitement. For all of her bashful ways, Susan was possessed of an outstanding romantic streak. "Oh, Thea, only think of it! A captain and a Lord in our very own neighborhood."

"How do you know?" Thea asked with a sudden thought.

"Know what?" Susan responded, not taking her eyes from the object of her interest.

"That he was heroic?"

Susan sighed familiarly, turning finally to look at her friend with an equally familiar roll of the eyes. "Theadosia Ridley, there is a world outside of Littleover and if you would only take your head out of the clouds you might see it. It might well behoove you to read a newspaper occasionally. He was made a viscount in reward for his actions." London newspapers, or more accurately the goings on of London Society, were Susan's obsession. She was so familiar with the Town and its denizens that Thea liked to joke she could greet everyone by name and smartly find her way to all their homes, even though she'd never actually set foot in the capital.

"Ooh, just look at that Lydia Coopersmith," Susan continued with a rapid-fire change of topic. "She's a new gown every week!"

Thea followed Susan's gaze, noting that yes, indeed, the rose gown Lydia was wearing was new. "Perhaps her father should invest more of his money into improving her deportment instead of her wardrobe," Thea quipped, earning herself a scandalized laugh from Susan.

"Oh, you are too bad, Thea!" Susan stated, still giggling. "Although one cannot argue with your observation."

Thea merely raised her eyebrows in response and helped herself to another cake, setting her mind back on her own finances.

As for the Viscount, he would have left long ago: would have excused himself with practiced ease and abandoned this rustic crowd for the silent shelter of his new house. But he had caught a glimpse again of those eyes, those remarkable green eyes staring directly into his own, and he could not tear himself away.

That Miss Straw Hat had immediately thereafter turned away had been a small impediment, but he was a patient man, certain that an opportunity for closer contact could not be far away.

His patience came in handy when, unavoidably, talk turned to the war. It started with some of the younger bucks discussing Waterloo amongst themselves, in tones purposefully strong enough to reach him.

He blinked, taking the briefest moment to collect himself as the familiar sensation of dread threatened to overtake him. Gritting his teeth, he stared non-committally ahead, hoping as ever to avoid the topic.

All such hope was lost as the young woman at his left addressed him directly, inquiring rather vapidly, "And were you at Waterloo, my lord Captain?" She earned herself a good laugh from the lads, who were only too eager to find an opening.

"Not likely, Lydia," one of them informed her, "since Waterloo was fought on the soil of Belgium and the Captain was in the *Navy*." She rolled her eyes prettily and Gideon knew she could care less what she said, as long as the consequence was attention.

The picnickers were closing in now, gathering round with their questions and endless, endless discussion. He knew what he would see when they looked at him, knew that all too familiar glint of hero worship in their eyes and he cursed their ignorance with silent resignation.

Ten years – ten long, bloody years – he had spent in His Majesty's Navy, only to return home, battle-weary and heartsick, to find that the war was the only thing that people wished to discuss. Personally, he longed to never speak of it again; he wanted only to discuss innocuous matters such as the weather, or livestock. Perhaps, as he entrenched himself in the fiber of village life, there would be a dispute over fences to get the blood boiling, and he would bestir himself to come down hard on one side or another.

Lord Birch had plans. He would live a quiet life. He would not speak of the war. And most importantly, he was never, ever, under any circumstances, going to set foot aboard a ship again.

"...'course Wellington couldn't have done it any differently..."

He also never wanted to hear Wellington's name again. Or Napoleon's.

They didn't know – couldn't know – the horror. To them, safe at home these long years, it was all patriotic honor and glory. He had heard a lot since his return; the casual way in which battles were discussed, with a sort of proprietary criticism, as though it all would have had a different outcome if only they had been given command. They would go on and on, as though talking about it somehow equated to having participated in it. He let them talk, giving them only vague replies when absolutely necessary, downplaying his activities, doing it all as though nothing they said even remotely affected him.

"...not *so* many casualties, really..."

The effort was not without its toll; he could feel his face hardening as he struggled against the rising bitterness. He could also feel the

stiffness in his leg beginning to turn to pain, as it did when he was too long upon his feet. He was careful not to draw anyone's attention as he shifted slightly, leaning more solidly on his cane, but less careful in allowing some of his impatience to show.

"...damned Frenchies. But damned good brandy, too, isn't that so, my lord Captain?" The group laughed at the quip. Yes, Gideon thought privately, I have given the better part of my youth in fighting our nation's enemy so you can have easier access to their brandy.

Miss Coopersmith sighed with exaggerated boredom. "Oh, this war talk is wearying, indeed." She was right on that count, he thought. "Let us ride into Biddington!" Biddington was a nearby town; small and not much in the way of interest, but obviously a keen diversion to the younger picnickers, for they gathered around at once, excitedly making the arrangements.

Much to his relief, they were instantly diverted from the war talk.

The horses were brought and he was forming his excuse, when Lydia announced, "Of course Thea, you won't go. We know how frightened you are of horses." Some of the group tittered, and Gideon turned. He had almost forgotten her, Thea Straw Hat, during their war talk. And now here she stood, quite within arm's reach. The wide-brimmed hat shadowed her face, but he was still able to see her expression – composed and still.

"Yes, Lydia. I am not one for horseback," she answered evenly while looking at no one in particular.

Her friend seemed to feel the disappointment keenly. "You aren't going home, are you Thea?" She looked pointedly from Thea to Gideon.

Thea smiled at her. "There's no reason in the world for you not to go on without me, Susan."

He hadn't been made a captain just by chance. He was a good sailor, and a natural leader whose men gave their respect freely. But what had really made him a success was his ability to seize the moment, and once having done so, to know instantly what to do with it. He took the moment.

"It would be my honor to see you home, Miss..." He let the sentence hang, fishing with casual insistence for her surname. She merely turned, using the huge brim of her hat to block her face from his view.

"Ridley." It was her friend, Susan, who answered, looking at him with unmistakable awe and a deep crimson blush.

He smiled down at her, very pleased with himself, the day suddenly full of possibilities. "Miss Ridley."

He had a look of satisfaction upon his face that Thea disliked. "Really, it is quite al – "

"You must come!" interrupted Lydia, who was already mounted atop a splendid mare, the tip of one boot peeping through prettily flounced skirts. "My lord," she added as an afterthought, and then changed her tone to a less commanding one. "It really is such a lovely ride, and we must show you Biddington. Thea can walk herself home – she does so all the time, do you not? And you really cannot be so selfish as to spoil the Captain's afternoon, can you?"

Thea thought it questionable as to who was spoiling whose afternoon. Turning from Lydia back to the Captain, she continued, insisting, "I assure you, there is no need of an escort. I am abundantly capable of seeing myself home and you mustn't curtail your afternoon for my sake."

"Nonsense," he said, in steely, commanding tones, extending his arm as an added measure. She took it after a moment's hesitation, conscious of Lydia's disbelieving glare and reluctant to draw attention to herself by refusing too persistently. They parted ways with the rest of the company, the jangle of horses, shouts of laughter and conversation fading away behind them as the riding party headed in the opposite direction.

Thea and Captain Birch walked in silence. Thea did not know what to say, overcome by awkwardness at their conspicuous joint departure.

The Captain walked a slow, ambling pace. She was in general a brisk walker, and at this moment, distrustful of the Captain's motives in insisting to see her home, wanted nothing more than to accomplish that task and free herself of his company. She managed to extricate her arm from his at the first available opportunity, and walked resolutely several steps ahead of him.

When she spoke, it was brusquely, without turning back. "It was unnecessary to forego the outing for my sake, my lord. Littleover is a safe enough place. I'm quite used to going about unescorted."

"Well, Miss Ridley," he replied in marked tones, "indeed my offer of escort was not done entirely for your benefit." She shot him a glance over her shoulder and he gestured with his cane. "I've a bad knee, which, unfortunately, makes riding uncomfortable at best and frankly, impossible at worst. I'm sure you can understand why I would wish to walk."

She had noticed his reliance on the cane and chided herself for forgetting it. He obviously hadn't wanted to draw attention to the fact before half the village. How suspicious and fanciful she had become. Forgoing an apology, she merely slowed her pace to match his, biting down hard on her lip.

"It's not something I tend to point out," he said, as though absolving her of any wrongdoing.

She nodded silently, glancing at him from the corner of her eye. He was, even upon the reliance of a cane, an imposing figure. Very tall – she would need to tip her head back if she wanted to look at him fully – he carried himself as one would expect of a national hero, with great dignity and quiet strength. He might be injured and retired, but his physique still bore the lean and muscled marks of active duty. Somehow she sensed that this was not a man who would ever allow himself to go soft.

His profile to her was engagingly masculine. A strong nose and chin, a full mouth that spoke of a good humored disposition. Dark-haired, well-dressed, certainly only a few years above thirty, there was no denying he was a handsome man in the prime of his life.

He limped slightly as he applied pressure to the cane, though his gait was mainly even, his stride long. She wondered what had happened to him.

"And where exactly is it that you live, Miss Ridley?" he turned, looking down at her as he asked.

"I live..." she began and paused, her attention arrested by a fine white line running from the edge of his lip in a straight line up towards his nose. It was a most fascinating scar, softly denting the edge of his lip and adding a touch of battered charm to his handsome features. Thea could not help but move her glance past the scar, upward, swiftly looking away after finding his azure blue eyes staring straight down into her own.

She laughed nervously. "Why, I live at the very edge of your new property, my lord. I do believe I am your nearest neighbor." For some reason, making that acknowledgement flustered her, as though she'd admitted something deeply personal, and she fought the urge to quicken her step, feeling like a foolish hen. She focused her attention resolutely on the meadow to her left, letting the large brim of her hat block her face from the Captain. He strode along in silence, seemingly content to enjoy the view.

Green hills rolled gently into the blue horizon. Stone fences crisscrossed the view, and in the distance she could make out the white fluffy forms of sheep. Birds sang sweetly in some nearby trees, and the air was fresh and healthy.

Littleover was indeed a nice enough village: quaint and picturesque, the very ideal of English country life. Thea supposed the Captain's new house, empty for many years, would now host parties. She imagined the crowds of London society coming down, spoiling some of the tiny village's peace. At least Susan would be thrilled with the activity. Nevertheless, Thea sighed deeply.

"Have I somehow given offense?"

Thea winced internally when he spoke. She was known to lose herself in thought like this, at times so deeply that she would even speak aloud. "Of course not," she replied, unsure how to elaborate, unsure why standing next to this man had her discomfited. That discomfiture expressed itself in an uncharacteristic terseness.

He broke the silence again after several minutes, asking, "I gather you must do a great deal of walking, Miss Ridley."

She turned to look at him, wondering at the question. "I do indeed, sir. But why do you presume so?"

"I logically assumed so after the comment that you were afraid of horses." He watched her with friendly amusement.

"That is not precisely true," she said in a businesslike tone of voice. "I happen to adore horses. I simply do not like sitting on them."

The Captain laughed, and Thea found a smile lifting the corners of her mouth as well. She stifled it. She wasn't looking to amuse him, and she certainly wasn't going to feel pleased that she had unintentionally done so. She seized the opportunity to go her own way. "Your home lies just over the next hill, sir. Continue on straight ahead and you shall have no problem." He would have spoken, but Thea turned and was quickly walking away, calling out, "Good day to you, sir," to his already retreating form, leaving him staring after her in surprise.

CHAPTER TWO

When her mother was alive she used to accompany her into the garden. Not as real aid, mostly for the companionship, as Thea had failed to inherit the gift for growing her mother so amply possessed. *No, no my girl*, her father would say, *the only green you've got is in your eyes*. And he'd tweak her cheek every time, even when she was good and grown and far past the age of childish gestures. But she'd always laugh, openly pleased to be her father's cherished girl.

The roses, even now after years of lackadaisical care, bloomed in riotous abundance. They were her mother's legacy, and had each bush not been carefully and lovingly planted by those beloved hands, Thea would have plucked every shrub from the earth with her own bare hands. It was morose, a chilly reminder of a child's naïve certainty in her parents' immortality.

She turned to the small patch of herbs that she tended under Agatha's guidance. She took a deep breath of the balmy evening air, glad that summer had arrived, and went back into the cottage.

"Agatha," she called out, "I've collected your herbs. Is it a soup or tisane you want?" Thea frowned down at the mass of greenery, seeing nothing more than a pile of weeds. "...by osmosis at the least," she muttered to herself, thinking of a lifetime spent with Agatha and yet somehow failing to absorb the servant's encyclopedic knowledge on the medicinal uses of plant life.

Agatha chuckled feebly, even in her weakened state not failing to be amused by Thea's confusion. "It's a tisane, my girl. Let it steep good and long, for it needs to be strong."

Thea poured, watching the hot water cloud as it struck the herbs. The teas grew constantly stronger, yet Agatha grew progressively weaker. She was an old woman, had in fact already been middle-aged when she accompanied Thea's parents to Greece. Not for the first time Thea wondered what had possessed a widow of prime years to accompany two young newlyweds to a foreign country as their one and only servant. It was indicative of Agatha's spirit, and poorly stifled quest for adventure.

She forced a smile to mask her concern, and took the tisane in to Agatha.

–

There was a smell in the air, tangy, sharp and fresh, that pleased Gideon immensely. He cocked his head, stifling the urge to close his eyes as he filled his lungs. His senses, overcome as they had been with the decaying stench of warfare, rejoiced in the long absent aroma of

life chugging along in its normal, everyday way.

"Good day to you, sir."

Reverie interrupted, Gideon turned from the open window to find a stout man addressing him. "Might I be of some assistance? That is to say," the gentleman continued before Gideon could respond, "I saw you standing here, looking rather – if you will beg my pardon – disconcerted and I thought I might be of some aid."

Gideon, opening his mouth to respond, was once again prevented from doing so. "Charles Everleigh, Captain. We had an appointment today."

Ah, yes, the vicar. Gideon had forgotten. "Of course, Mr. Everleigh. How very good to meet you. Please come in." He gestured to the room behind him, wondering where one might ask a vicar to sit in all this mess. Boxes, crates and packets of every type and size crowded the library, straining the available space and his nerves. His rolled shirtsleeves stood as testimony to his good intentions, but he had accomplished precious little else today apart from surveying the chaos of his earthly goods.

"I did let myself in the door. I only hope it is of no consequence to you, sir."

"Not at all. I am still quite short-staffed. Still in the process of moving in, as you can see."

The vicar looked around the room, nodding his understanding. "Of course, of course. May I...?" he gestured to a side chair, clearing it of its contents at Gideon's nod of assent, and seated himself.

It was the books, really, that were the problem. Despite the best education that England had to offer, Gideon had never particularly excelled at his studies. Possessed only of a rough working knowledge of French, all other languages had been and remained an incomprehensible jumble of odd sounds and intonations. And many of the books – boxes and boxes of books that were still arriving from London – were, rather ironically, written in foreign languages.

There was no way on earth he could even begin to organize the mess without the aid of a translator.

Feeling somewhat lightened at postponing the task until such time as said translator could be found, he brought out a bottle of Scotch, offering some to his guest.

"It's very good of you to take the time to see me today," Mr. Everleigh said, taking a long drink of the whiskey. "Very good indeed. Never fear, sir, I shan't trouble you overlong. I've only come to acquaint myself and offer you a warm and blessed welcome to the neighborhood."

Gideon nodded, watching the man. It was his experience that clerical types were seldom so unobtrusive as they made themselves

out to be.

"Should you have need of anything, you need only ask. I hope we will have occasion to see each other regularly while you abide here."

"You won't find me in your church, if that's what you're hinting at, Mr. Everleigh," Gideon said, wanting to forestall any possible sermonizing.

The vicar's eyebrows shot up, and Gideon's mouth tensed. Still, it was only logical to assume that was what the man was after, and better to disabuse him of any such notions as quickly as he could.

Mr. Everleigh, however, was looking at him in a way that made Gideon sure he had misread him entirely. "That is disappointing, to say the least. I shall take the liberty of praying on your behalf. Every Sunday, promptly at nine o'clock." He finished off his whiskey and sighed contentedly, looking at the jumbled contents of Gideon's library. "It would appear you are very well read, my lord," Mr. Everleigh continued, opting for a change of topic.

"Yes, it would appear so, wouldn't it," Gideon replied, thinking that he was anything but. Perhaps he should have heeded at least some of Simeon's advice and taken some care at his studies. But that would have pleased his brother, an act which would have been altogether painful.

"May I...? The vicar gestured to an open crate, rising to thumb through some volumes at Gideon's nodded assent. "A wonderful collection, truly."

"Do you read Greek?" Gideon asked, unable to keep the note of hopefulness from his voice. It would certainly make matters simple. The majority of the books were in Greek.

"Poorly, sir, poorly," the vicar tutted. "My education was devoted mostly to the church. I've some Latin, of course. Are you not proficient?"

Gideon shook his head. He had misspent his youth, that much he would admit, if only to himself. And his adulthood thus far had been spent in one or another of the lower circles of Hell. "Languages were never my forte," he allowed. "Unfortunately. I am actually sending to London this afternoon for a translator." He set a piece of paper determinedly before him.

"No need to go so far as London, my lord. There is Thea," the vicar pronounced matter-of-factly with a look at the whiskey decanter. He continued at Gideon's look of inquiry, "Theadosia Ridley, my lord. Lives just here in the village and speaks Greek like a native. Lived there for some time, if you can imagine it. I'd gladly speak to her on your behalf, should you wish it."

Theadosia. Thea of the Straw Hat, of course. Theadosia of the full lip and hypnotic derriere. Suddenly his youth didn't seem so misspent

after all.

"Sir?"

He brought his attention back around to the vicar. "I'm sorry, you were saying?"

"Shall I speak to Miss Ridley?"

"It won't be necessary, Mr. Everleigh. I had the pleasure of meeting Miss Ridley the other day. You say she lived in Greece?" Gideon asked casually while pouring the man another glass of Scotch.

The vicar nodded. "Came to Littleover with her parents, oh, I suppose it's been a good number of years now. The years do go by."

"She's not a native then?"

Mr. Everleigh shook his head. "Born and raised on some or other island in Greece. They came here to Littleover after returning to England. It's quite tragic, actually. The parents died within a year of one another. But a lovely girl. A lovely girl. Frankly," he finished solemnly, "she could probably do with the extra income."

Gideon cocked his head, even more intrigued by the lovely Miss Ridley. "Has she come upon some financial difficulties?"

"I'm afraid so, yes. I daresay her parents didn't have much to leave her. Her father was a scholar of Greek history. Not a wealthy man by any means."

"Is she alone?"

"There are no relations, to my knowledge, and she is unmarried." He tutted into his whiskey. "Though she's an aging servant with her."

Gideon leaned back, pondering the information, which, while bleak, was at least some bit of insight into the life of the lovely Miss Ridley. A spurt of sympathy for her situation, impoverished and alone, kindled a spark of protectiveness within him.

"I shall speak to her myself at the next available opportunity." Mr. Everleigh gave him a perceptive look, curious and not a little bit defensive, forcing Gideon to add, "To ascertain her abilities, you know." He stifled a smile, feeling like a devilish schoolboy.

–

He was, for a titled gentleman, too willing to mingle with common folk, Thea thought. Just shy of a fortnight and here he was again, talking to her, looking down at her with intense blue eyes that bade her stare back. But she resisted the pull and stared resolutely at the thin white scar marking his lip. Mesmerizing in its own right, the line flexed and tightened as his mouth moved, and she found herself wondering how he'd gotten it.

"...don't you, Miss Ridley?"

Oh, heaven, he was asking her something. She was annoyed suddenly, at him and his scar, for making her thoughts wander. "And

what is that, sir?" she asked very rigidly.

A puzzled look momentarily crossed across his face. "Speak Greek," he elaborated.

"Yes," she replied grudgingly, wondering what he was after when he continued looking at her with an expectant expression.

He continued after a moment, and Thea knew he was repeating himself. "As I was telling you, I am currently attempting an organization of my library and a large number of the materials are in the Greek language, which I happen to be hopelessly ignorant of. It would be simple work, I believe, for one fluent in the language, such as yourself. Categorization, mostly, along with some translation, requiring perhaps the better part of the summer. Is it something you might be available for?"

He ended by quoting the proffered salary, an amount which almost made her lose track of the conversation again.

"There are also some artifacts," he continued persuasively, as though she needed persuading. The sum he'd mentioned would fairly settle all of her financial woes for the entire summer and fall, even beyond if she were especially prudent. "I should naturally consider any aid with materials outside of books as outside your necessary duties, and compensate you accordingly."

More money? He was actually going to give her more money? Thea's mouth opened, but the shock at such an unexpected solution to her financial predicament left her at a loss for words. Captain Birch was looking at her expectantly – he must find her addled! – but the combined elements of surprise and relief had left her stunned.

"If you are unable or unwilling – "

"Oh, no! I am willing. And able. Very. Willing and able." She was nodding her head like a fool, only thinking of how she longed to run home and share the news with Agatha.

Captain Birch seemed very pleased as well. He smiled, the scar going very white as he did so, forcing Thea to marshal her wits.

"Very well, sir. I think you shall not be disappointed."

His smile deepened when she said that. Thea looked away, resisting the urge to ask him how he had learned about her. Her language abilities were not a secret; hardly anyone in Littleover was likely to overlook that she spoke Greek. They had a long memory, these villagers, for things both useful and inconsequential.

Her suspicion abated, leaving as ever a trace of dejection in its wake that she was no longer the girl so easy with her trust. Pushing the feeling away, she looked up again at the Captain's eyes, blue enough to outshine the cloudless sky, and allowed a small smile to touch her lips.

The Captain, Thea realized as he unexpectedly opened the door himself, had an indentation in his square chin. It was rather appealing, and though obviously so easily overshadowed by the intriguing scar on his lip, she wondered how she had failed to notice it before.

Deliberately looking past him, she entered the expansive hall and was met immediately by two enormous dogs. Despite herself, Thea drew back, somewhat alarmed by their sheer size and the boisterous greeting she was getting. Irish wolfhounds, the animals were nearly the size of small ponies and seemed very capable of devouring Thea in one sitting.

"Down!" the Captain commanded with a moderate degree of success. The animals backed off, allowing Thea at least room enough to breathe, and transferred their ecstatic affections to their owner. "You're not afraid of dogs, are you?" he asked with an apologetic smile, attempting to disengage himself from a canine embrace.

"*Are* those dogs?" she retorted, reaching out a tentative hand to pat one of the beasts on its great head. She got a huge, friendly lick in return and laughed. "What are they called?"

"That's Thor. And that, uh," he rubbed a knuckle over the bridge of his nose, "is Helen." The dogs, over their enthusiasm for the new visitor, turned their attention to each other and bounded out of the room.

"Helen?" Thea looked from him to the dog and back to the Captain in disbelief. "You are aware that Helen is a *boy*?" The dog's gender was obviously apparent to one with even the most limited knowledge of animal anatomy.

Captain Birch shot her a humorous look. "Quite. The puppies – "

"*Puppies*?" [THEA]

His look this time was somewhat more quelling and Thea smiled in apology.

"My niece and nephew named the dogs," he continued. "Alexander is nine and Margaret is seven. She had, much to the eternal impairment of my poor dog's masculinity, just learned about Helen of Troy and insisted that the dog should be so named. What could a fond uncle do?"

Thea merely raised her brows, wondering how on earth such an exuberantly male dog was going to live up to the name of Helen.

"Shall we?" Thea nodded and followed him, looking about. She supposed his belongings and furnishings were in route – the house, though large and fine, was oddly empty. The few pieces of furniture she could see must have come with the house, for they were old and worn. Their footsteps echoed as they crossed the room.

At the door to the library he paused, indicating for her to proceed

him. She took one step and stopped. The morning sun had not yet penetrated the westward facing windows, but it was not the dimness that halted her step. Dozens upon dozens of crates were crammed higgledy-piggledy throughout the expansive chamber, just waiting to fill the empty mahogany shelves that lined the tall walls from floor to ceiling. Books were scattered across the room, stacked on the floor and littering every visible surface, from the chairs to the massive desk that stood near a large window. She drew in a deep breath of excitement and held it for a moment, savoring the sight before her.

If even a third of the contents required her translation skills Thea would be, at the least, financially secure for a year. She exhaled, quite literally breathing easier. And underneath the joy of achieving some measure of economic security, there ran a deeper thrill at the vast treasure spread out before her. Fingers veritably itching to begin, she turned to the Captain. "May I?"

"Of course."

She turned to the nearest open crate, absently removing her hat and setting it on a box, and lifted the topmost book. The burgundy leather of its cover was soft beneath her hands, its spine creased with wear. The telltale marks of a well-loved volume. She inhaled the scent so peculiar to books, a mix of paper, ink and something her father had liked to call expectancy. *Do you smell it, Theadosia? Expectancy, my girl. Anticipation for what shall be revealed between the covers.*

Ah, Papa, how you would love this, she thought, and a shaft of sadness stabbed through her. It was her inheritance from him, this deep and abiding love of books, and the presence of so many volumes could not fail to bring him to mind. Still, she sensed the Captain's gaze upon her, and suppressed the melancholy turn of her mood.

"It is...amazing. You are fortunate, sir, to possess such a treasure."

He watched her, an odd look on his face, almost tender. She turned away, and asked with brisk purpose, "Where shall I begin?"

"I was actually hoping you could tell me," her new employer responded, coming a step closer as he did so. She glanced over at him, noticing the look of barely disguised bafflement on his features. He raked a hand through his hair. "I've certainly no bloody idea."

Thea nodded. "Well, we shall need a plan of action." It seemed a daunting task, but one, appreciative as she was for the opportunity, she was ably up to. "I shall need to have a better idea of the exact contents of these boxes, I'm afraid."

"Consider me at your disposal, Miss Ridley." He smiled, his mouth creasing in an all too pleasant way as he removed his coat and began rolling his shirtsleeves. Thea looked away, supposing his current lack of servants would not allow him to ring for help.

They began by opening more crates and emptying some of the

contents. Thea felt as though each box was like an enormous gift, and could not stifle her gasps of pleasure at the discovery of a number of particularly good volumes. She could not imagine owning so many books, could not imagine the prospect of entering this room at any given time and pulling down the volume of her choice with nothing before her but hours of reading. It was so different from her life that it might as well have been a dream world.

Still, there was a thought that ran through the back of her mind, and after a while she paused, prompted by genuine curiosity to give it voice. "Forgive me, but why did you buy all these books if you can't read them?"

"I didn't buy them," he explained. "I acquired them."

She frowned.

"During the war," he added, seeing her confusion.

"The spoils of war?" she jested.

He tensed, and his tone went noticeably colder. "I prefer to think of them as rescued." Then, after a long silence, "Men will take trinkets and jewels, but will destroy books and art. I...it seemed wrong, so I would take them myself, knowing they would at least be saved from destruction."

He spoke again after another long silence. He did not look at her, but stared down at his fingers, where they rested atop an unopened crate. "War leaves the oddest things in its wake. You could not begin to imagine."

"I'm sure I couldn't, sir." Sufficiently abashed at her own flippancy, Thea turned industriously back to her work, and vowed to ask no more questions.

Though she threw herself into the work, Thea could not force herself into unawareness of the Captain's presence. She wished he would take himself off and leave her to the sorting, but he lingered, doing nothing of any real consequence. She would not flatter herself and think that he was looking at her, and yet... She quite felt he was looking at her.

–

She had red hair.

No, he corrected himself, it was brown.

Actually, he realized as she moved away from the window, it was a nice combination of red and brown that altered as did the light. It was a warm, enticing shade and he was certain that it must smell very nice. He thought it must be curly, although she had it drawn back in a fairly tight bun, so it was difficult to be sure.

She seemed to be enjoying herself. She had squeaked in delight on more than one occasion, seemingly impressed by one or another of the

books and not, as he had secretly hoped, by his chivalrous rescue of said tomes. Regardless of the cause, he had thoroughly liked the sound.

Her long, graceful neck merged into the barest expanse of soft white shoulders, which disappeared into the confines of her gown. Her plump breasts moved against the bodice of the simple dress, the fabric going alternately tight and slack, tight and slack as she moved. Every now and then, as she bent over to lift something from one of the endless crates, the gown molded to the delectably curved shape of her backside, and Gideon would once again experience the sensation of breathlessness which had come upon him at their first meeting.

She was businesslike, diligent, with no apparent inclination for tomfoolery, pausing only to peruse a title or two. His only hope was that she would not work too fast and thus abbreviate his time in her presence. But he had, in his imaginative and resourceful way, already contrived additional tasks with which he could entice her to remain in his employ. Cataloging, translating, appraising...

It was certainly going to prove an interesting summer.

CHAPTER THREE!

"*Theadosia*!" Susan squealed. "Never say that you have gone into the employ and home of Captain Lord Gideon Birch and that you are only just now telling me about it! Oh, how frightfully delightful! Yet too terribly bad of you, Thea. Really, I would never expect such...such..."

"Composure?" Thea interjected, stifling a smile at the cool look she earned herself.

"Restraint. Dereliction. I never would dream of keeping such intelligence from you!" Susan allowed her rebuke to sink in for a bare second before continuing. "What is he like? What is the house like? Oh, I can only imagine the grandeur! Why, he must have dozens of servants! In livery!"

"Actually," Thea interjected before Susan could get even more carried away, "he's only a handful of servants. Un-liveried, I'm afraid. The grandeur is at a bare minimum."

"But it must be positively blissful to be in his company," Susan gushed, and sighed brokenly. "I should faint dead away."

Used to her friend's dramatic ways, Thea smiled, but could not neglect injecting a note of reality. "He was made a peer by the King, Susan; he is not the King himself."

Her prudent admonition did nothing to quell the other girl's enthusiasm. "He is as close to the King as we will likely ever get in Littleover. Oh!" she gasped and looked at Thea mischievously. "Lydia Coopersmith will have fits!"

Thea smiled weakly. "Actually Susan, I'd rather you not mention my employment. It..." She trailed off, not wanting to go into elaborate explanation.

"Why, surely it is not meant to be a secret?" Susan asked, surprised.

Thea shook her head and looked down into her teacup. Susan was a dear girl, and Thea's only real friend in Littleover, but there were some topics Thea preferred not to discuss. "That's a lovely gown you're wearing," she offered lamely, attempting to change the topic.

Susan, not to be distracted, looked at her in that open, perplexed way she had. "It is a perfectly respectable position, is it not? Theadosia?"

Thea exhaled and bit down on her lower lip. "Of course it is. It is simply a matter of...privacy. I do not see that it's anyone's concern that I've had to find employment."

Susan nodded, and was silent. After a short while, she asked, "Is it to do with the gossip?"

Thea's blush answered for her.

"I had thought the talk would have died down with John Godfrey's departure," Susan said quietly.

Thea winced slightly, as she did every time for the past year and a half that his name was mentioned.

"How could he just go off and marry Cecily Weatherington after paying you such particular attention?" Susan fumed. "He is not a man of honor."

Thea turned her gaze out the window, not answering. What was there to say, really? *It was a sad, understandable fact that Cecily Weatherington came with an exorbitant dowry and, needing to pay his debts, John could not allow his affections to influence where he married.* True it might be, but she'd no wish to give it voice. She was afraid it was all too disgustingly banal.

In a tiny village such as Littleover, the transfer of Mr. Godfrey's attentions was generally known. And while it was understood that he had made the prudent choice, and there had been no promises or agreements, Thea was ever since considered to have sustained a blemish upon her reputation. She and John had not been betrothed, merely too often in one another's company to go unnoticed. And when he'd offered for another girl, speculation had quickly turned to gossip, and Thea hadn't had the benefit of a protective Papa to shield her against the rise of it. The censorious looks, abrupt ends to conversations as she approached, falsely stifled laughter... She knew. Even without the patent jibes from those less civil, mostly Lydia Coopersmith and those within her coterie, she knew.

Of course it would have all turned out differently if John had married her.

With a soft shake of the head, she shed the image of John Godfrey from her thoughts and turned her attention back to her friend. "Never mind that now, Susan."

"I should hate him, if I were you. In fact, I shall hate him on your behalf," Susan finished tartly.

It was a silly gesture, but it warmed Thea's heart nevertheless and she smiled. "Will you give him the cut direct?"

"I will give him the cut direct, and...cast aspersions on his tailoring!"

_

"Please stop!"

Gideon, one foot poised on the ladder, stopped his ascent and looked over his shoulder. Miss Ridley was glaring at him sharply, hands fisted at her hips. She gestured for him to come down.

"I will do the climbing, sir, and you may hand me up the volumes.

Begin with the stack from the left, and do keep them in the same order."

She was mightily commanding, this Miss Ridley.

He protested ineffectively, and then did as she said, watching the swirl of her skirts as she climbed to the top of the ladder.

"Sir," she scoffed, looking down at him and extending a waiting hand to begin filling the top shelf. "You are a war hero."

As though he needed reminding. "How does that impair my ability to stand atop a ladder?" he asked crossly, handing up a heavy book.

"You've an injured leg and I cannot see how standing on the ladder will do it a bit of good. Besides," she fit the volume into the shelf and turned back to him for the next one, "you might disrupt the order of the texts."

He opened his mouth to voice a complaint, but then abruptly closed it. She had been very reserved at first, deferential, even shy, but as her expertise began to shine through, that had quickly changed. She saw him, he was sure, as a sort of hapless assistant, one fit enough only to move heavy objects, and though she deferred to him, it was only a formality.

He liked the confident way she took over the library. He also liked the way she smelled, like fresh air. It was a fitting scent, for she repeatedly refused his offer of a coach and insisted on walking the two miles to his house.

"And how do you suppose I shall avail myself of those texts on the uppermost shelf if I am incapable of climbing the ladder, Miss Ridley?"

She made a sound of amusement. "I suppose you will have to be able to read them before exerting any effort in bringing them down. Rest assured I am placing the least interesting books up here, so you will have all the bottom shelves to go through before you are ready for these."

He looked down at the book in his hand. "This looks rather intriguing – perhaps I might wish to read it first."

Thea took the book from him, not bothering to conceal a look of bold doubt. Her auburn eyebrows rose as she read the title aloud. *"On The Fact That There Were Not More Than Two Editions of Aristarchus's Recension of the Iliad."* Her gaze, mossy green, mirthful, moved to his face. "I daresay it is not worth learning the language for."

Gideon had to agree.

She popped the book onto the shelf. "If, however, after learning Greek and reading the remainder of the contents of your library, you find yourself overcome with curiosity about the top shelf, you will simply have to call a servant to fetch them down for you. Assuming, of course, that you have hired any servants by such time."

"I do have three," Gideon replied sullenly, watching her. As she

raised her arms, her dress lifted, revealing a small expanse of leg between the hem of the gown and the top of her sturdy boots. There was at eye level a hole in her serviceable stocking, a small rent that would never have been noticeable were he not standing so close to her. He studied the hole, and the tiny, tiny glimpse of her bare flesh revealed beneath. He swallowed.

He forced his gaze away, silently deriding himself. The notorious Gideon Birch, rakehell, whose reputation had once been the worst of any of society's sons, was caught off guard by a miniscule glimpse of skin.

"Perhaps it is impertinent of me," she lowered her arms, and her gown hid the tear, "but what are you planning on doing once the library is completed?"

"Doing?"

"Will you ever actually read any of these books?" she clarified, raising her arms to the shelf. Gideon's gaze went automatically to her leg, to the small glimmer of pale flesh.

"It is truly a fine collection, that much I can ascertain even at this early stage." She talked on, unaware of the turn of his gaze or thoughts.

His reputation had been beyond disreputable. 'Black as his shiftless soul,' Simeon had liked to say. He was said to have known and done things that would make a courtesan blush. It was ridiculous for him to be standing here, transfixed by the sight of his translator's worn stocking as though he had never seen any more of a woman.

Yet transfixed he was.

And ridiculous, too, he feared. Mayhap he had been too long without the company of women.

"...wonder why people would travel with such things? Not in the least essential, I'm sure." Her voice was soothing, melodious, only adding to the spell that had overtaken him. He handed up book after book, and she reached up and down, up and down, displaying and hiding the object of his fascination.

The little tear conjured up sights too erotic to resist. He could imagine the rest of her leg, and where it rose into the damp secret places hidden by the dark recesses of her skirt.

She was talking still, about...something. With a will of its own, his hand rose. His fingers wrapped around the comely leg, his thumb rested upon the hole. Whether it was even possible to feel her bare skin through the tiny tear was irrelevant: a charge bore through him regardless. His thumb moved against the tear, and he said, very stupidly, "You have a hole in your stocking, Miss Ridley."

He did not notice that she had gone stock still, that it was absolutely quiet in his library.

The spell broke with a loud *boom*! as a particularly heavy book went falling from the topmost shelf, missing his head by bare inches. He jumped back, shaken from his reverie, and stared at Miss Ridley like an open-mouthed oaf as she climbed down the ladder, grabbed up her hat, and exited through the outer door.

–

Fool.

Idiot-imbecile-simpleton.

The oaths formed a litany, berating him with every step he took. In addition to the mental self-flagellation, his leg ached, his fast-paced walk sending spasms through his wounded knee. But it was only what he deserved, after behaving like such a – Had he named himself a moron? He added it to the list.

He thought of what he would say to Miss Ridley, if he ever arrived at her house. The truth, that he found himself lusting after her like an untried boy, was not going to help matters any. At least he had that much sense left.

He only knew he had to get her back. Remembering the vicar's comment that Miss Ridley could use the funds compounded his sense of guilt. If she refused to return to his employ, he would, in addition to manhandling her person, be responsible for depriving her of her much-needed source of income.

At length he reached her home. It was a small stone cottage, once charming but now worn with the shabbiness of inadequate care. The gate where he stopped hung crooked on an ancient hinge, and weeds grew upon the path to the battered oaken door. An enormous willow tree grew just to the side of the house, its branches hanging down onto the roof.

With a sigh of resignation, he moved to the door, rapping with the head of his cane, the sound ringing more sharply than he intended. He schooled his face to an unreadable look, but no one came to answer. He thought he heard a sound within, and rapped again, but his knocking was unmet. He was prepared to wait, and cast his glance around the house.

A worn path led around the side of the cottage, disappearing into a gate near the back of the house. Determined to find Miss Ridley, he followed it, lifting the latch and soundlessly opening the gate before him.

He didn't see her at first. There were flowers, roses, dozens if not hundreds of them, blooming wildly, riotously throughout the small garden. They were red, and pink, yellow and white, drooping heavily, growing like some fantastical dream of paradise. Their scent rose into the sunny air, filling his head.

He stopped in his tracks, stunned by the unexpected sight.

He was overcome by a sense of absolution. As though, for all the horrible things he had seen, for all of the death and slaughter and spilled blood in his life thus far – for all of that, there were places such as these, places of incredible divinity, waiting to wash him clean of memories.

And because it was true, he had to give it voice, and did so without thinking. "Beautiful."

"How dare you!"

Miss Ridley spoke and he blinked, but the sensation of heaven would not fade.

–

Perhaps he was an opium-eater. Thea amended her opinion, recalling that opium induced a deep sleep, and the Captain appeared to be awake, if not completely in command of his faculties. He was standing at the garden gate, staring with fixed wonder at the ramshackle mess she'd allowed her mother's roses to become. Not opium, but something.

She had quite a set-down prepared for him – she'd thought of nothing else since she'd stomped so indignantly out of his house – but he disarmed her with the look in his eye.

"Did you do all," he lifted hand to indicate the garden, and kept it suspended, "this?"

"My mother," she replied shortly, furrowing her brow as she watched him. He leaned suddenly on his cane with both hands and shook his head.

"I have never seen its like."

"I am not able to care for it as she did," Thea said, and regretted her defensive tone as his gaze finally moved to her. The look of glazed wonder faded, and he seemed to recall what it was that had brought him here.

"I have lived a long time at sea, Miss Ridley," he said, altering her notion. "I have been at war, death and destruction my constant companions. One cannot forget what beauty is, but its effect..." he trailed off, grimacing slightly as he shifted position.

"I have forgotten how to react in its presence." Thea's breath caught. She was thoroughly certain he had been talking about the garden, but it seemed suddenly as though he were talking about her, about the incident in the library. His silent gaze willed her to respond, but taken aback, she was unable. Nor was she able to look away.

Just as the silence between them began to grow uncomfortably taut, Agatha appeared at the door. "Thea," she called out weakly, "is aught amiss?"

"Agatha! You should be in bed!" Concern co-mingled with relief. She hurried to Agatha's side, taking her by the arm.

"There was someone at the door, but I see he has found you."

Captain Birch stepped forward. Unwilling to disturb Agatha, Thea had no choice but to introduce them.

"Might I be of some assistance?" he inquired, obviously heeding Agatha, who appeared more frail than usual, leaning heavily on Thea's arm.

"I will see her to bed," Thea replied sharply, cringing as Agatha's eyes bored into her curiously. Softening her tone, she said, "You poor dear, you've tired yourself out coming down those stairs. Why, you should – Agatha!" she cried as the old woman stumbled and began to collapse against her.

Captain Birch was there in an instant, catching Agatha before she could fall to the ground. Thea's stomach twisted with sickened concern as she saw her eyes were half-closed, sunken into the wrinkled flesh. Agatha moaned softly, and without a moment's hesitation the captain lifted her into his arms.

"Where is her bed?" he demanded.

"Th-this way." Thea rushed into the house, leading the way up the stairs as Captain Birch followed with Agatha in his arms. Depositing her on the bed, he grabbed her hand and began rubbing it strongly. Agatha was still conscious, but terribly, terribly pale. She moaned softly.

"Have you any hartshorn?" he asked briskly.

"Yes!" Thea fetched it quickly, and watched some of Agatha's color slowly return as the captain waved the ammoniac under her nose.

"Just a bit of this, that's right, a little more." His soothing voice overrode Agatha's faint protests, if not the cold knot of fear in Thea's stomach.

After what seemed like an hour, but was probably less than fifteen minutes, Agatha calmed. "Thank you," she muttered feebly to Captain Birch with a fluttery attempt at a smile. She managed to extend the smile to Thea before her head fell back into the pillow and she was asleep. Captain Birch left the room, while Thea adjusted the blankets before quitting the chamber.

He was waiting for her in the sitting room. The room was small, crowded with worn furnishings and artifacts her father had collected in Greece. Captain Birch seemed enormous in it, filling the room with his presence as much as with his physical form.

"Has she seen a doctor?"

Thea nodded. "It has been some time. She doesn't trust them fully, and they never did do anything to aid her."

"I could have a doctor sent from London. My family has an

excellent physician – "

"I do not want your pity," Thea said, flushing angrily.

"It is not pity, it is empathy." His look was quizzical. "And it is not for you, Miss Ridley. It is for her."

Thea opened her mouth and closed it. The Captain was still regarding her curiously, and she vividly recalled the feel of his hand on her leg. She looked hurriedly away, but not before glimpsing the ghost of a smile at his lips, as though he knew exactly what turn her thoughts had taken.

"Charity for the plebeians?" she asked archly. The shadow of a reaction crossed his face, an almost imperceptible tightening of the skin over his cheek. His gaze moved over her, leisurely, taking her measure from head to toe and back again. His blue eyes were hot and Thea fought the urge to cross her arms over her bosom. She clasped her hands instead, pressing them tightly together and grinding her teeth.

"Oh, you are anything but plebian, Miss Ridley. Of that I can assure you." His lip lifted, indenting at the site of his scar.

Thea huffed indignantly since she could think of nothing to say. She was offended, shocked at what he had done, but she was, perhaps stupidly, not afraid. Unsettled, certainly, but not afraid of him. He took up his cane from its resting-place and moved to the door, momentarily distracting Thea with a noticeable limp.

"The position is still yours, if you want it," he said, looking back at her over his shoulder.

She wanted to decline, to send him and his position to the devil, but she was a practical girl. The possibility of destitution loomed large without this situation, and she thought he might just be aware of that fact. But what should he care, when what to her was survival was to him likely all a game?

It was difficult to get out, even knowing it her salvation, and there was no graciousness in her tone as she answered him. "Very well."

With a jaunty smile he turned, leaning heavily on the cane as he set off towards his home, and she wondered how he had managed the situation without any sort of apology at all.

CHAPTER FOUR

The room was dark, sitting in the cool shadow of the early morning sun. She came by the side entrance, a set of double doors that opened into the library from a small walled garden. A place where one might step outside for a meditative breath of air, a place to read in the warm sunshine. A place, she privately thought, wasted on a man of war. How could a soldier fully appreciate a small garden, or a magnificent library? It took a scholar, a man such as her father, a man whose fate had been perversely different.

Her father would have appreciated these books, would have loved and revered them as Captain Lord Gideon Birch was surely unable to. Would have *read* them, at the least. The Captain's was a vanity collection, arranged to impress.

Such ungracious thoughts had accompanied her this morning, a balm to her temper. It was her first day back after the 'touching incident', as she had mentally deemed it. Most of the intervening time had been spent in useless fantasies of telling the Captain he could stuff his project, which resulted in a sense of displeasure at having to return, and an underlying resentment at having no choice in the matter.

She nearly missed him, sitting at the great mahogany desk, in the gloom almost indistinguishable from the dark wood around him. A glimmer of his white shirt and a small movement were the only things to alert her to his presence.

"Good morning," she said with the distant politeness she'd decided to adopt in her dealings with him, but he only stared, making no reply. Thea clenched her jaw, and set smartly about her work, keeping her back to him.

After a long while, he spoke, startling her with his presence as much as with his question. "Why did you come back here, from Greece?" His voice was gravelly, as though long unused.

"Because my parents wished it," she replied after a moment, suddenly wondering how long he had been sitting here like this, in the dark. In the lessening shadows she saw the frown that marred his brow, the palpable air of despondency that enveloped him. His dark hair was disheveled, his face not clean-shaven as usual. She looked down at the book in her hand. "My mother was ill, and wanted to return to England."

"Because it was her home?"

"So she thought."

He nodded. "Did you wish it had been you that died? When your parents passed?"

She stared at him, shocked. It was an unheard of question, something no one of any sensitivity would dare voice, something he had no right to ask. Yet it was true, and very perceptive.

She almost didn't answer the Captain, but the aura of distress around him bade her speak. And while the question was personal, she sensed it was not idly asked. "It was not a longing for death, simply for the cessation of existence. My mother suffered a great deal, physically. My father's suffering was tenfold, for it was of the heart. But they were both delivered from their anguish, and I suppose I envied them that." She cleared her throat a bit, forcing past the peculiarity of voicing these thoughts aloud for the first time.

"And then, of course, they were gone and together, and I was alive, and alone." She bit her lip, hard.

"And England wasn't home, was it?" he said. "You had been gone so long, and it all changed, and there really was no place for you here anymore."

Thea was astounded. It was precisely what had happened to her parents, to her. It was, she realized with a jolt, precisely what had happened to him. "How long did you serve in the Navy, sir?"

His mouth twisted wryly. He rubbed both hands over his face, and answered with a sigh. "Nearly ten years."

"I received a letter last night," he continued after a moment, indicating the crumpled paper on the desk before him. "One might enjoy the arrival of a letter, anticipate with pleasure news from a loved one. I dread them, Miss Ridley. I have come to dread them with all my heart."

Thea waited, but he was silent. She moved closer to the desk, and gazed down at the missive. He shoved it across the desk towards her.

It was notification of the death of one Lieutenant Edgar Winfrey, recently of His Majesty's Royal Navy. She read no further, and set the letter down gingerly, respectful of its sorrowful contents. She bit down on her lip, unsure of what to say to Captain Birch.

Setting his elbows upon the desk, he rested his forehead against his fisted hands. "Lieutenant Winfrey served the last two years of the war with me. He was twenty-four years of age. He was betrothed, he was the only son, and he managed to escape the goddamn war physically sound. Do you know what a hunting accident is, Miss Ridley?"

Thea shook her head, puzzled at the abrupt change in topic.

"It is a polite euphemism for suicide."

Her eyes moved downward to the letter, so white, sitting so innocently on his desk. "You believe he – "

"I know," he interrupted. "I *know*." He raised his head, and Thea's heart lurched in her chest at the sight of tears brimming in his red-rimmed eyes. She had seen her father cry, but Papa was a soft man,

sensitive and loving. Captain Birch was a soldier, a warrior by trade and by appearance. Tall, broad-shouldered, self-assured; brave enough under fire to have earned a peerage. Men such as Captain Birch were not supposed to cry.

"War is death. You kill and kill because you must, because the killing is the saving of yourself. You turn away from your soul to do it, accept the fact that you are a monster because it is what must be done. But what keeps a man going in all of the carnage is the thought of life as it should be, life after the war. Safe houses, a clean bed, soft women. A world where death is an anomaly."

She stood at the desk, her gaze locked with his. How she wanted to look away, to turn from the sight of this man's pain. The depth of it, revealed with no warning, was too much. She wanted to stay angry with him. Instead, the sight of his disturbing raw agony created an urge to comfort him.

"But it follows you," he continued harshly. "It will not let go. And you realize that every hope you had was silly and naïve, and that you are merely a fool with fool's dreams. There is no escape. The war will never end." She held her breath, silently willing him to regain control of his emotions and contain the darkness threatening to spill from him.

Finally, finally, he broke the spell and looked away. Thea bit back a sigh of relief.

One of the dogs barked somewhere far off in the house.

"I am not familiar with warfare," Thea said quietly, after long minutes of silence. "Yet I suppose you are right, in a regard: You shall always bear the burden of all you have witnessed and done in the name of duty."

He turned back to her, but his gaze did not meet hers. A corner of his mouth lifted; a wry half-grin, sour. "You are far too young for cynicism."

She bristled at the latent condescension. "I do not see how age is at all considerate of blighted hopes."

He raised a brow at that comment, as though inviting further discussion of what said blighted hopes might be, but Thea looked away. Such a great deal of emotion could only lead to unease, and a discernible edge of discomfort tinged the growing silence. It was proving an unusual morning, and Thea wished to restore some of the regular formality between them.

"I am merely cataloging today, sir – nothing that requires the use of the ladder."

I don't need your help, she had meant, but the look in his eye changed, and she turned away quickly, and went to the small table set up for her work. Keeping her gaze away from the desk where Captain

Birch sat, she buried herself in the books, formal, businesslike and not at all the type of person anyone would wish to confide in.

Thea worked, but the Captain's morose demeanor would not leave her thoughts. She was unable to stop imagining the horror of war and her own imagining, she knew, was as nothing to his nightmarish reality. Yet he had rescued these books, made the effort to save them while others would not have given them a second thought. She sneaked a look at his desk, where he still sat in silent contemplation. A hero he might be, and a lord, but at the end of the day, Captain Lord Gideon Birch was a man alone with his memories.

She took her pen, absentmindedly scrawling a quote that came to mind:

"We have seen great deaths and strange,
And many a sorrow of unknown shape"

Looking down at the words, Thea sighed. The noise brought the Captain's glance upon her, a slight lifting of the brows, scant curiosity at the sound. She cleared her throat and looked away. She knew enough of death, and something of being alone. *It is not pity, it is empathy,* he had said.

Long after he had quit the library and withdrawn somewhere into the vast recesses of his house, Thea rose, stretching the kinks from the muscles of her back. She made to leave, and spotted the piece of paper upon which she'd scrawled the quote. On impulse she took it up, and set it down amidst the other papers on his desk.

She left by the outer door. It was warm in the small garden, and she took a great lung-full of the fresh, late-afternoon air. It was lovely. A place, she thought, that might benefit greatly a man of war.

–

Given more time, he might have gathered himself, might have been able to put a composed face on things. Hearing of Winfrey's useless death had touched upon a long-suppressed fear of futility. And then Miss Ridley had walked in, and seemed so beyond such hostile sentiments, so attuned to his pain that it had all poured out without constraint, and he had felt the better man for it. Instead of shame or foolishness at having revealed so much to her, he felt buoyed.

She had seen. She had understood.

He could never have sent a man to his bloody end if he'd allowed the depth of his fear and disgust to show through the cold, disciplined commander's façade. But that masking of human emotion had cost him something, some essential component cardinal to the composition of the human spirit, and until his outburst in the library, he'd been direly afraid the loss was permanent.

It was good to know he was only human after all.

Thea didn't know why she bothered.

It was not as though she really enjoyed Littleover company. With the notable exception of Susan, most people her age barely spoke to her. By the time she had arrived in the village, an awkward teenage girl bordering on the foreign, the other girls had already formed their friendships, and sealed them tightly against outside intrusion.

They were civil. Even Lydia Coopersmith had never stooped so far as to insult her directly, which, Thea believed, was simply a matter of time.

She looked over at Susan, discoursing pleasantly with two other girls, and smiled to herself. Susan encouraged her to socialize. More correctly, she nagged Thea until she acquiesced. It was good, Thea supposed, to get out at all, even if one were often left sitting silently alone.

Many of the girls had married by now. She didn't know at what age she would officially qualify for spinsterhood, but was sure that the time fast approached. And yet it was not so very long ago that she had believed herself to be on the cusp of matrimony herself.

Go and fetch that enormous hat, Thea. I've come to take you out.

She couldn't stifle a wistful smile at the memory of John's usual energetic greeting. She missed his laughing eyes, his bright smile. Thea had thought him very handsome, had always felt a thrill when she heard his voice at her door. So blond and fair, he seemed to shine with his own light. He had approached her in that dark time after her father's death, and like any creature seeking light and shelter Thea had gravitated to him effortlessly. John was kind, full of mirth, compliments that she secretly yearned for. In her lonely, lonely time, he had easily become virtually everything to her.

They had been in love. Or Thea had. Or thought she had. It was hard now, in hindsight, to understand what was real and what not. She had believed John's declarations, had trusted the fervent passion in his voice. She'd no reason to doubt him, no reason to expect that he would break her heart with shocking abruptness one hot, sunny afternoon. *I must marry Cecily! You know I've an obligation to my family and Cecily's dowry will more than cover it.*

What she had wanted to ask, but been too afraid to voice that day, was when he had managed to court Cecily. When, during all the time he had spent with Thea, during all the soft, promising whispers that had fallen from his lips to her ear, had he managed to arrange a marriage to Cecily Weatherington? There was only one possible answer, of course, and the idea of him thinking of Cecily during his

moments with her had almost been harder to bear than his impending marriage.

Naturally, it only got more difficult, since the entire population of Littleover knew they had been spending so much time together. Such shocking behavior! If only poor Thea had had a father, or a brother, a male relative at all to stand for her honor! Alas, such was not the case, and the only one to stand for her honor had been herself. She did so to the best of her ability – keeping her head high, her face carefully neutral. Keeping herself present, lest her absence make them think she was hiding.

No one would have the satisfaction of seeing a reaction from her.

With a shake of the head, she reprimanded herself for her ill-advised reverie. It was not wise to dwell on thoughts of John. Out of sight, out of mind, she repeated to herself.

"...quite shockingly handsome." Thea looked up at the sound of Lydia's voice coming from behind the nearby hedgerow. In a moment of puzzlement she thought Lydia was speaking of John, that it had been so obvious where Thea's mind had wandered. But Lydia couldn't even see her – she was blocked from view by the hedge.

"And so very heroic! I could positively swoon for all that he has done for England." It was another voice, one of Lydia's set. John Godfrey, to the best of Thea's knowledge, had never done anything remotely swoon-worthy for England. The only hero present was –

"Captain Lord Gideon Birch." A chorus of sighs rang out at the mere mention of his name, followed closely by giggles.

Thea wanted to get up and move, but the next comment about the Captain stayed her.

"...have heard that he once had quite another sort of reputation." It was Lydia's voice again, trilling in delight at knowing so much about Littleover's newest resident. "He was known to be quite the rake before his time in the Navy."

The other girls gasped in collective shock. Someone giggled again, but was hushed. "The London Mamas feared him noticing their daughters just as much as they longed for him to do so. They say he has quite a portion from his brother the earl, which combined with that positively divine countenance more than qualifies him as suitable. They were amply willing to overlook his various peccadilloes."

"Peccadilloes?" one of the girls whispered in shocked curiosity. Thea could not help but roll her eyes.

"Oh, indeed. Tales of his conquests – " more giggling ensued " – were legendary. He is reported to have had dozens of mistresses, and to have fought in numerous duels. He was as loathed by the cuckolded husbands as he was loved by their wives."

Thea looked across the lawn at the distinguished figure of her

employer. Captain Birch was handsome, but in a singular way: in the directness of his gaze, in the thin scar on his lip, in the way his body told of the magnitude of his life's experience. She looked down, seeing his ebony walking stick, the way that he leaned on its silver handle with practiced casualness. She doubted anyone at the lawn party realized how much he relied on it.

He didn't seem like a rake. In fact, if asked, she would have wagered him to be an altogether different sort of man. She knew him little, but he did not appear pompous, or arrogant, or narcissistic – any of the things she imagined a rake to be. The only women she'd ever seen at his house were the cook and the housekeeper, both of them near sixty. There was the incident in the library, the shocking sensation of his hand wrapping around her leg, the jolt of contact of his thumb on her bare skin. But she had put that down to his eccentricity, and vowed to be more prompt with her mending.

She swallowed, reminding herself that he had also been so considerate as to send his doctor for Agatha. That did not seem like the action of a rake.

Granted, she did not have the best judgment concerning men, nor had she ever known an actual rake. Even John Godfrey was more of a cad than he was a rake.

She looked back at the Captain – tall, fit, graceful in a thoroughly masculine way. His shoulders were broad, his legs long. The sun fell on his brown hair, reminding Thea of chocolate.

There was a way he had of looking at her, so directly, his blue gaze moving over her as deftly as a touch. Thea swallowed again, and took a long drink of her lemonade.

His reputation was not surprising in the least, now that she thought on it.

"How very...lascivious," one of the girls said, causing another tittering outbreak. Just at that moment Captain Birch looked up, meeting Thea's gaze. He smiled a bit, just a slight lifting of one corner of his mouth, and nodded in greeting.

Thea smiled in return, and looked quickly down at the plate of sweets in her lap. She had done nothing but listen, and yet she was ashamed. They had spoken of the Captain in derision of his colorful past, without thought of the actual man that had come to be their neighbor. Lydia and her friends did not know Captain Birch, were indifferent to his war experiences and could only laugh over the dissolute man he had been. Or might still be.

But he was also her employer, and Thea could not forget that without him she would at this point be quite out of money. Surely she owed him some loyalty for that alone.

Lydia and the other girls were still nearby, blocked from Thea's

view only by the hedge, with no idea she'd been listening this entire time. With an audible sigh Thea stood and turned, looking at them pointedly. One of them had the grace to blush, the others looked away. Lydia's self-conscious laugh quickly turned into a smirk as she glared at Thea.

"Eavesdropping, Thea?" she said. "How very discourteous."

Thea held her gaze. "Perhaps you should have the foresight to peer around corners before you begin gossiping. One never knows who might be nearby." With that Thea turned and walked as far away from Lydia as she could, although not before hearing a whisper and the subsequent eruption of laughter.

She didn't mind, not really. She wouldn't have befriended Lydia Coopersmith if she were...well, Thea couldn't think of a sufficient analogy. If she were the Prince of Wales, she thought absently? The Princess of Wales?

"Is it a personal debate, Miss Ridley, or may anyone join?"

Thea looked up in surprise to find Captain Birch before her. "I beg your pardon?" she asked, utterly baffled. The bright sun shone behind him, and she put up a hand to shade her eyes and see him better.

"You seem to be debating yourself. I couldn't help noticing that you were undergoing a variety of emotions. I thought I might be of some service." He smiled, and Thea noticed how different this man was from the despondent one she'd last seen in his library. He was at ease, relaxed and jesting. Thea wondered briefly whether she'd imagined the intensity of his feeling that day.

"I was merely...thinking." Remembering what the girls had said about him, she felt heat go through her cheeks, and looked down at her boots.

"I do not mean to pry. That is to say – " he smiled again. Thea glanced up to see the scar on his lip whiten. " – I do mean to pry, but will allow you at least the sanctity of your own thoughts."

"How very kind," Thea responded dryly. And then, "I have not had the opportunity to thank you for sending your physician. Agatha is feeling much better." Whatever the doctor had done – for he had shooed Thea out of the room like a provoking child – had been successful, for Agatha was more herself after his visit than she had been in weeks.

He tipped his head in acknowledgement. "Thank you for letting him in," he added, still smiling.

"You should not have troubled yourself."

"'Twas no trouble. He was already in the neighborhood."

Thea looked down at the cane again. The doctor had been there to see his leg, of course, but she still felt indebted to him. "You may remove his fee directly from my salary."

He lifted a brow at that, and shook his head. "Allow me to do this, since I'm sure my sudden presence in your garden did nothing to help your servant's condition."

Thea nodded once. "You are very kind, sir."

"I have been called many things, Miss Ridley, and seldom kind." He laughed, a bark of genuine amusement, and the sound of it sent a sudden spiral of warmth through Thea's chest. She bowed her head, unwilling to hold his gaze.

"Does that surprise you?"

"I'm sure I haven't an opinion, sir," she responded without looking up, reluctant to give voice to any thoughts of him. She heard a low chuckle from him.

"You shall have plenty of time to form one then, as I shall be gone to London. I expect to return within the week, and have every confidence that you will get by without me. And if," he continued wryly, "by some quirk of fate, you find yourself missing my aid, I will have a second ladder installed in the library which should more than serve as my double. I daresay you won't even know I'm gone."

Thea could not help but laugh at his self-deprecating offer. "If the ladder can hold books without dropping them, or disturbing their intended order, then your absence shall be all too obvious, I'm afraid. But if the ladder can pepper me with endless comments regarding the whereabouts of its luncheon, then I shan't even notice you've gone."

He laughed again, loudly, the sound once again pouring through Thea like warm wine. She bit down on her lower lip in order to temper her own smile. "You see you may enjoy London at your leisure."

A sobering darkness erased the mirth from his face, and he looked away from her. "Alas, such a thing is not possible, for my journey to London is one of obligation, and nothing of pleasure." He kicked once at his cane, watching as the tip struck his boot. "I must attend Lieutenant Winfrey's funeral, and pay my respects to his family."

Unsure how to respond, Thea was silent for a moment, thinking of the unpleasantness of his task, the sadness of the Lieutenant's story. "It is a heavy obligation, sir, and very good of you to fulfill it," she said quietly.

He looked back at her, and Thea was certain he recalled the scene in the library the other day. A strange emotion crossed his face; a look of sadness, touched by the briefest hint of embarrassment, or pain. The blue of his eyes was deep, murky with the emotion he obviously did not wish to express, but could not fully contain. Knowing any comment on his outburst was unwanted, Thea also sensed it would not do to look away. She held his gaze for what seemed a long time, but was only seconds, until the stormy struggle for control had passed.

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It was a sunny day, balmy and beautiful, and Thea felt justified in allowing herself a small break in the library garden. There were quite a few volumes that had piqued her interest, and she took one now into the serene enclosure, intent on perusing it at some leisure before the Captain's return.

She settled on one of the two stone benches, and propped the book on her lap, not opening it for the moment. She could not help but stop and admire her surroundings; the sharp contrast of the newly blooming flowers against green foliage, the songbirds dipping and soaring in the cerulean sky, the air fresh and clean. Everyday beauty, her mother had called it. The stunning occurrence in the commonplace was all the testament May Ridley had needed to God's presence, and on days such as this, Thea readily agreed.

Her mother's faith had been reaffirmed every spring, when the myriad plants under her control came into life. She had believed herself the vessel through which God worked his wonder, and took very little credit for her knowledge of the growing arts. But when Thea paused in wonder at the glory of nature around her, it was her mother's presence she felt. The transient caress of the gentle breeze she took to be her mother's touch, and bowed her head against it in unconscious longing, closing her eyes in anticipation of the familiar scent of roses filling the air.

But it did not come, and the brief illusion that her mother was near faded, leaving a renewed emptiness in its place, and Thea's eyes were now shut against the charge of tears.

"Well, this is quite picturesque."

Her head snapped up, and she lurched, sending the book in her lap tumbling onto the grass. Reflexively she reached down to grab it, turning to the door. There was a man there; a stranger, yet vaguely familiar. He was tall and handsome, with wavy dark hair and sharp blue eyes, and well-dressed, standing with a proprietary air that stilled her. Feet braced far apart, he rested his hands on his hips in an indolent manner that belied the look of pointed assessment in his eyes.

"Gideon appears to have done quite nicely for himself."

"Captain Birch is away from home, I'm afraid," she offered.

He looked around the walled garden and then back at her. He stared at her, lingering, assessing.

"Don't say he's gone in search of other favors already. How positively..." his gaze moved over her coarsely, "...demoralizing. But typical of Gideon's gauche manner."

She gaped at him, bewildered. "I beg your pardon?" She'd a sudden

urge to hug the book protectively over her chest.

"I must admit that even I am surprised by his hastiness," he continued, as though she hadn't spoken. "He can't have set you up that long ago – he's only been in Derbyshire a few weeks, after all. And now here he is already bored and on to the next conquest. Tut, tut."

Thea had no idea what he was going on about, but she found herself disliking this man and his rudeness more by the minute. "Captain Birch will be – "

"Captain *Lord* Birch, don't you mean?" he interjected and rather snidely, Thea thought. "Where has he got himself off to?"

She hesitated in answering. The man had yet to introduce himself, after all. He seemed to notice her hesitation.

"Come now, you can tell me – he is my brother, after all."

Thea experienced a sudden relief, and smiled tentatively. "I am Theadosia Ridley, sir, the Captain's – "

"I hardly think it appropriate to introduce yourself to me," he interrupted, raising a hand dismissively. He laughed shortly, obliterating Thea's sense of relief. The garden walls seemed suddenly to tighten around her. "Nothing personal, of course, just that I don't see the need to familiarize myself with one of Gideon's trollops. Never been one for sloppy seconds."

It took a second of stunned disbelief for his words to sink in. She felt the heat of a furious blush blasting her face, and a great wave of anger swelled within her, moving her feet. He appeared sardonically amused by her reaction, belittling even in his silent perusal.

Thea did not think. Only walked the few steps to the doorway where he stood and let fly the hardest slap of her life. It landed with a satisfying *crack*!, sending his head flying to the side. She closed her hand tight around her stinging palm, and jumped adroitly away as he made a reflexive grab for her. He cradled the offended cheek and stared at her, too stunned to reach for her again. The smug look of superiority in his eyes was gone, anger and incredulity in its place.

"Translator," she said shakily. "I am your brother's translator, and I will thank you to keep a civil tongue when addressing me, although if I have even the remotest fortune, I will never set eyes upon you again. I am a gentleman's daughter and not some man's – " her voice wavered, for she had never said the word aloud " – whore."

He was staring at her in open-mouthed shock. "Your brother is attending a funeral in London, paying his respects to the family of a deceased comrade, and not, as you so kindly put, in search of other favors."

He removed his hand from his face, and Thea noted the angry red welt that she had left there, and was glad. Nobody had ever said such an insulting thing to her in her life. Quickly she turned away, lest the

enormous desire to strike him again overtake her.

"How very loyal you are. For a gentleman's daughter," he added quickly.

Thea turned to face him again, narrowing her eyes in dislike. God, but he was smug. He was titled, and she tried to recall what it was. Susan had told her the first day the Captain had appeared... Earl.

"And how very rude you are. For an earl." The smug look remained, and Thea ground her teeth, unable to think of anything else to say.

This time he took the curricle. Miss Ridley's home was just far enough away to irritate his leg by walking, and he had no intention of limping back to his own home in growing discomfort.

He'd come back from London to find a curt message from Simeon, and had marveled at the good fortune that had sent his brother to Littleover just as he had been away. His sense of relief, however, had cooled to apprehension as Miss Ridley failed to arrive for work on either of the subsequent two days. It was, he admitted to himself, a definite drawback to having a short-staffed house, for no one could tell him if Simeon had encountered his assistant. A run-in with Simeon was sure to inspire truancy in even the most stouthearted of workers, and after nearly a week of her absence, he was forced to conclude the worst.

He had brought the dogs, and while they were not best suited for conveyance in the curricle, he was counting on their boisterous good-spiritedness to serve as a buffer during what he was sure to be an unpleasant encounter. They jostled energetically beside him, tongues hanging out in hungry anticipation. "Soon enough, lads," he said soothingly, wondering anew what Simeon had done to offend Miss Ridley.

–

"A whore."

Gideon blinked, and almost asked Miss Ridley to repeat herself again. "My brother called you a whore?" She nodded stiffly. Her color was high, and though she kept her eyes from his, he could see how brightly they shone with unexpressed emotion. Gideon raked a hand through his hair, and turned his gaze out the window where the dogs rollicked merrily on the lawn.

He was, for one of the very few times in his life, at a loss for words.

He looked down at his cane, poking the tip with his boot. "Why?" he asked after a moment, although the question was as much to himself as to Miss Ridley, posed in wonderment at the strange measures his brother undertook.

"Perhaps you can tell me, as it was your trollop he accused me of being," she replied tersely, crossing her arms stiffly over her chest.

Gideon's bafflement was ceding to anger, and he cursed Simeon under his breath.

"That's very colorful, indeed. I must say you Birch brothers are remarkable in mixed company."

"Miss Ridley," he began after a breath, "I would love to explain my brother's actions to you – God knows they are inexcusable – but I would first have to understand them myself, and that is something I have not been able to accomplish in thirty-two years."

"So you have no idea why he would just walk into your house and accuse me of...that?"

"None whatsoever, I – " he whirled to face her. "You can't possibly think he got the idea from me?" She raised an eyebrow, telling him that that was precisely what she thought. An astonished laugh escaped him. "Believe what you will of my brother, but do not even begin to imagine that his opinions or actions have anything to do with me."

She appeared doubtful. "I did not think it at first," she admitted grudgingly. "It only seemed, after some consideration, the logical explanation for his slur."

"Even a brief meeting with Simeon is enough to assure you that he is anything but logical. Might you tell me precisely what happened?"

She did, finishing by flatly stating, "I'm afraid I slapped him."

For the second time in mere moments, she had rendered him speechless. She was a woman, not particularly small but nowhere near Simeon's size, naïve enough not to understand his thinly-veiled insinuations. But she had the temerity, the sheer stones to slap the Earl of Clybourn in his smug face.

Gideon laughed. He howled. He roared with laughter until a worried frown dented Miss Ridley's lovely brow, and he was forced to lower himself into one of her chairs. "It is too perfect," he said when he was finally able to speak. "I only wish you'd encountered him some twenty years ago."

Miss Ridley seemed mildly embarrassed by his reaction. She clenched her lower lip between her teeth, and stared fixedly out the window at the dogs, and then surprised him again by asking, "Is there a tendency to madness in your family, sir?"

"None to my knowledge, Miss Ridley, although it would certainly explain a lot."

"Quite."

He felt he owed her some sort of explanation, and said with some asperity, "Apart from the bare minimum of affection demanded by blood ties, there is no love lost between my brother and myself. His opinion of me has ever been low." He shrugged. "Such is the condition of the world for a wayward younger brother. And while I cannot apologize for his actions, I can for your treatment while in my house."

She blushed and paused, as though considering the merits of any further contact with him. And quite rightly, he thought; one minute he was groping her leg, the next she was forced into violence by his brother. She might do well to keep away from him altogether.

But he didn't want her to stay away. He wanted her back in his library, where he had the perfect excuse to stand close to her and inhale the smell of ink that seemed to permeate her hair, where he could watch her white teeth chew her lip as she scrutinized the texts.

"He won't be back, my brother. 'Tis a shock he even came to Derbyshire this once."

The doubt played across her face: the need to protect herself versus the need to eat. Her near destitution was his trump card, and he would play it unhesitatingly. "There's a very big job to do, and I hope I can count on your services, Miss Ridley."

He could see the decision in her eyes, and permitted a smile to show on his countenance. The sigh of relief he stifled, lest she see how much he wanted her back.

A small cough turned his attention to the door, where he beheld Miss Ridley's elderly companion tottering in the doorframe. The woman was obviously feeble, but a lively twinkle shone merrily in her eye, hinting at a history more robust than her present figure portrayed.

"Good day to you, sir." She moved slowly into the small room, clutching her blue woolen shawl with aged, lined hands, and lowered herself into the nearest chair. A faint hint of sage accompanied her.

"You should not be up, Agatha," Miss Ridley exclaimed, frowning, and moved to settle a blanket around Agatha's feet. She adopted a protective pose behind Agatha, resting a hand on the back of her chair.

Gideon inclined his head. "Miss Ridley has informed me that you are feeling somewhat recovered."

The old woman nodded, glancing to Thea and then back to him. "Well enough. I thought 'twas you come to see Thea, so I came down to offer my thanks." Miss Ridley turned her frown on him, as though he had summoned the poor old creature from the comforts of her bed. He smiled at her, and she looked quickly away.

"I'm not one to put my trust in doctors," Agatha continued, "but yours did do some good, I will give him that. 'Twas very kind of you, sir, to bestir yourself on my behalf."

"Think nothing of it," Gideon answered. "Dr. Fitz-Jones was required to pay a call upon me, as it were."

Agatha looked surprised to hear this, and gave him an appraising once-over.

"My knee," Gideon tapped his left leg with the cane. "An unwanted French souvenir."

A speculative look came into Agatha's eye. "If I might ask, what was the nature of the wound, sir? I dabble a bit in herbs, and such," she elaborated. Gideon thought he saw Miss Ridley roll her eyes.

"Perhaps I might be of some aid in the matter?"

Gideon hesitated. He didn't like discussing his wound. It was one thing to bear the mark of it, limping and walking with a cane for the rest of his life, and quite another to re-hash the events that had caused it.

Agatha noticed his hesitation, for she continued, "I've helped many people, sir – Thea can testify to that," she turned her head to Miss Ridley, who nodded her agreement, albeit unenthusiastically. "Injured men, such as yourself. There were many during our time in Greece, and I like to think that I was able to provide at least some with a bit of relief."

Miss Ridley touched Agatha on the shoulder, lightly, briefly, the gesture conveying comfort and not a small bit of understanding.

He hesitated. It was doubtful that the old woman was going to use this as an excuse to discuss the war, he decided. "It was shrapnel," he said, quickly, succinctly. "The Naval surgeon took out what he could, under the conditions, but it was impossible to clean it out completely."

It was shrapnel, a million steely points of fire that he'd been able to ignore in the hellish thick of the battle. He'd felt it well enough once the shock had worn off, just as he'd felt every fiery probe of the surgical instruments as they dug into his knee, trying to get the pieces out. He'd watched it all, too, never taking his eyes from the doctor's fat fingers as they moved over his shattered knee. Delirious with pain, vomiting at sight of his own blood pumping out of his leg, he'd had to know they weren't going to take it off, had to make certain the surgeon's hands were at all times free of the dreaded bone-saw.

Agatha and Miss Ridley were looking at him questioningly, and he realized a question must have been put to him. "I beg your pardon?"

"Can you describe the pain?" Agatha asked, her bright eyes under bushy brows watching him closely.

Gideon started. None of his doctors had ever asked him such a question. After all, pain was pain, and he was about to say so, but paused. Now that the idea had been put to him, he was beginning to realize the distinct property of his knee pain. "It aches," he said meditatively. "Always. Like a slow grinding of the bones. Walking exacerbates it – makes the pain grow, makes it – " he cast about for the proper word " – *hot*, if such a thing is possible. Sends it into spasms."

Agatha nodded, tapping a gnarled finger against her chin in contemplation. "I believe I've the necessary ingredients here to blend an unguent, sir. It should provide some relief, and 'tis the least I could do in return for your kindness to me. Might I also ask if you can predict the weather?"

Miss Ridley looked at Agatha quizzically, and Gideon was puzzled

for a moment, too, until her meaning dawned on him. "With impressive accuracy," he answered, laughing, and then elaborated for Miss Ridley, "My wound twinges in the advent of rain."

Agatha laughed as well, a weak chuckle that rattled in her thin chest. She put her hand on Miss Ridley's arm. "Thea will bring it to you."

Thea did not look overly pleased at the notion of aiding him in any way, but she nodded, and answered with a soft, "Of course." Perhaps she felt, as he did too, that it was another condition to bind them together. But her eyes, as she raised her gaze to his – large, mossy, so like placid pools covering unknown depths – belied no hint of discomfort she might feel. And for the second that her gaze rested upon him, Gideon forgot all about his wound and the war that had brought it. If those twin beams of green light *were* pools, then he would drown, and willingly.

"I look forward to it," he said, and she shifted her gaze, breaking eye contact but not the spell that seemed to have come over him.

–

For all that she attempted to keep herself from his notice, his lovely translator positively vibrated with energy. A soft sigh, a cough, the scratching of her pen against paper – he heard and noticed all of these things.

For many, many years he had lived in close quarters, sharing confining spaces with a variety of shipmates. It was the noise, really, that had been hardest to bear; the constant thrum of life aboard a ship that had not abated even as he was privileged to have his own cabin as captain. Men talking, equipment moving, the slap of water against the hull – it was never silent.

It was one of the reasons he'd chosen this house. So large, so removed, so *quiet*. There was not even the bustle of servants to fill it, for he had only three – a cook, a housekeeper, and a coachman-cum-repairman – and no intention of getting more. If desirous of companionship, he had his dogs, who adored him with the unrivaled, fervent, wet loyalty only found in canines.

What the bloody hell are you going to do in godforsaken Derbyshire? Simeon had asked. Gideon had merely smiled, letting the anticipation of peace and quiet overrule his brother's derision. He had found an increased immunity to Simeon co-existing with a fierce desire to be far removed from him.

Of course, his mother had looked at him as though he were mad, buying a house in Derbyshire. Could not Gideon stay with them at Clybourn? Could not Simeon allow him to live in one of his unoccupied estates, she asked?

No, and no.

There was no more reliance on his family. They could thank the war for that. A mere decade and a leg full of shrapnel had finally bought him independence. Simeon could bluster, could rant and rave until he was purple in the face for all Gideon cared, but his brother's notions of how he should live his life were now as useless as Napoleon's crown.

He liked to imagine himself as 'rattling' when he walked the corridors of his big, empty house. He could shout, or scream, or sing aloud. But he did none of these things, just strolled along silently, leaning freely on his cane, listening to the quiet bouncing off the walls.

Miss Ridley was not an intrusion to this quietude. On the contrary, her humming presence was the perfect antidote to too much silence. When he wasn't watching her work – for he did have to avert his gaze sometime – he liked being able to hear her.

Of course, his thoughts of late had taken a more physical turn. Looking was well and good, but the sight of that puffy upper lip had him imagining the taste of her. Sharp and sweet, he surmised, to go with her nature. He'd like to take her in his arms, feel the press of her ample breasts against his chest, allow his hand to wander down her form, lifting her ever-so-slightly to him by her lush derriere, move his head downward until his lips met hers, and kiss her. Slowly, only brushing his mouth against hers, but then taking that full upper lip into his mouth and sucking on it, running his tongue over it.

She would sigh, of course, and gently run her hands over his chest, allowing her fingertips to stray to his jaw, where they would linger in a soft caress. She might even whisper, *Oh, Gideon*, a tremor of longing just shaking her voice as she said his name. She might, but did not have to.

Just a kiss would do for now.

–

'"...at a ball for five hundred of their closest friends.' Oh!" Susan sighed and fell back onto the sofa, clutching her latest London newspaper to her chest. "Can you imagine it, Thea? The grandeur! The elegance! What a fortunate girl Horatia Hawes-Huntington is!"

Thea laughed, as ever amused by the longing in her friend's voice. "I'm sure she's the looks of a good plow-horse, Susan dear, and her new husband is very likely twice her age and girth, with no chin to speak of whatsoever."

"Theadosia!" Susan squealed, and tossed the newspaper at her. She rose just as quickly, taking the paper from Thea's hands and folding it neatly. "It may all be as you say, but 'tis all the romance a girl like me

will ever certainly find, vicarious as it is. How can you possibly be so unromantic?"

"Unromantic? Me? I must protest," Thea replied, enjoying herself immensely. "One never knows, Susan, when a rich, handsome bachelor will arrive in Littleover, cast his eye upon you and decide that you must be his. With quaking anticipation, he will approach your father and beg for your hand. Your lashes will flutter, your pulse will double, and you shall, at long last, ride into the glorious sunset as..." Thea paused, taking a deep breath for effect, "...a wife! Huzzah!"

This time Susan tossed an embroidered cushion at her, aiming successfully for her head. "It's not kind to make fun!"

"I am not making fun!" Thea replied. "I am merely illustrating to you, my dubious friend, precisely how romantic I can be. And I do believe it a scenario to your liking."

Susan sighed in acquiescence. "It is beyond doubtful. The only handsome, rich bachelor to set foot in Littleover has been your Captain Birch."

"He is not 'my Captain Birch,'" Thea objected, and then pressed her lips tight together upon realizing how vehemently she had spoken. She was still irritated that he'd managed to finagle a treatment out of Agatha.

"Well," Susan stared at her momentarily, and then waved a hand. "You are the only one to come into any sort of regular contact with him. He must have heaps of guests coming from Town?" Susan asked expectantly.

Thea shook her head. "Not a one," she answered briefly, and deliberately directed the conversation towards another topic.

It seemed she was incapable of escaping Captain Birch. If she was not face to face with the man – whether at work in his library or at her own home, where he was appearing with alarming frequency – she found herself discussing him. Or even worse, thinking about him. It would not do.

Captain Birch was her employer. Barring the odd incident in the library, he had never made the remotest gesture to indicate his intentions were anything other than above reproach. Even the mere idea that 'intentions' could be applied to any thoughts or feelings he entertained regarding her was inconceivable. Laughable. Implausible. And yet...

There was a certain stir in the air between them. When she worked, dutifully bowed over the pages of his randomly acquired literary treasure, she sensed his eyes upon her. The sensation brought to vivid recall their deep blueness, and the direct way his gaze bore into hers when, in less attentive times, she had dared meet his look. She struggled then to avoid eye contact, to pay special heed to her

meticulous notes and have no reason whatsoever to look up. But the very design of her actions worked against her, and only made her think of him more, and so tautened the current between them.

He had no business in her thoughts. She wanted nothing more than to do her work and slip away into the freedom of the waning day, to leave him in the twilight of his dusty library. But it was as though he walked out with her, and lingered beside her, stride for stride, on the walk home, and it was not until she entered her tiny cottage that thoughts of Agatha and chores to be done could push him from her mind.

And now Agatha had decided she must prepare an ointment for his wound. It was particularly irritating, that. That he should ingratiate himself into the personal part of her life; develop an association of any sort with what passed as her family. As her employer, he should maintain a professional distance, should not be acquainting himself with his assistant. Unguent, indeed! Why, he could certainly afford the finest physicians in the realm: What use could he possibly have for Agatha's herbal remedies?

"Wouldn't you agree, Thea?"

Susan's question brought her attention back, and she agreed automatically.

"Ha!" Susan scoffed. "I vow you do not listen to a full third of what I say!"

"That is not true," Thea protested half-heartedly. It *was* true, and it wasn't particularly Susan's fault, lengthy as her discourse could be at times. Thea merely had a tendency to wander away.

"I know that absent look on your face, the way you chew on your lip. Yet I suppose one must overlook your rude tendencies, if one wishes to remain your friend."

Susan was teasing her now, and Thea laughed. Unfortunately, her friend was bound and determined to bring the conversation back to Captain Birch.

"I did hear a rumor that the Captain's brother was seen in the village. I should very much like to see an Earl one day."

Thea blushed at the mention of the Earl. Her encounter with the vile man had left her shaken, for his assumptions of her character had struck painfully close to the fear within her. A woman alone with no imaginable means of income was assuredly familiar with the nature of Thea's fear. There were few respectable avenues of employment for a female, and on the cusp of utter poverty, Thea had faced the options before her, fearing her complete lack of qualification would prevent virtuous work. With no position, and no money of her own, she could well imagine the slippery slope that led a woman to search for a male protector.

She shuddered at thought, and not for the first time realized what an enormous debt of gratitude she owed Captain Birch. If not for his absolute lack of linguistic skill –

"Now you are frowning!" Susan exclaimed in high exasperation. "Really! I do not see why you spend any time at all in my company if you find me so tiresome!"

"Oh, no, Susan! 'Tis not the case at all, and I must beg for your pardon. I am – " she did not want to mention the direction of her thoughts and fears. While not rich, Susan had never known even the barest hint of poverty, and would most likely swoon at even the mention of women of ill-repute. "I am worried about Agatha."

Susan's expression softened. "'Tis very noble of you, to care for a servant so."

"She was always more than a servant, you know. She went abroad with my parents, and has tended to me from infancy."

"Of course, dear." Susan moved, and clasped Thea's hand warmly. "She is all you have left of them."

Thea's parents, Susan meant. Thea could only nod. She loved Agatha regardless, but, colored by the untimely deaths of her parents, her affection had become tinged with a desperate sadness that cried out for immortality for the last remaining member of her family circle.

She was better, Thea told herself, thanks to the physician. Thanks to Captain Birch, who had the depth of compassion to think of an aged servant.

Oh! She was thinking about him again. It was as though he had taken up residence in her mind, and bade her brain turn in his direction, somehow creating a connection between himself and everything else in Thea's life so that all thoughts led eventually back to him. It was frightfully annoying.

"Do you think he'll marry?" Susan asked, curiosity for the Captain unquenched.

Thea's mouth opened at the question, and then just as quickly she clamped it shut. "I'm quite sure I couldn't say. I am only his employee, after all," she answered, simply determined to put him out of her mind.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A moist, hazy drizzle broke out over the countryside in the early morning hours. Gideon had awakened long before sunrise to a dull aching in his knee.

He was sure that Miss Ridley, who insisted upon walking the two miles to his house, would not come, for he could not imagine anyone willingly traipsing through the country on such a morning. Mild as the rain might be, it was damp, and the ground was very wet. But she surprised him, popping through the library door only fifteen minutes past her usual time. He was standing near the window, desultorily staring at the wet lawn, for he had grown to anticipate her arrival each day, the sharp twist of attraction, the energetic buzz of her presence that was remedy to too much time alone.

He looked up at the sound of the door, and there she was, covered completely in a fine, shimmering raiment of raindrops. She was not soaked – it was as though the rain clung to her, loathe, as he could very well imagine, to break contact with her by doing something so silly as seeping into her clothing.

She looked up at him, and smiled abstractly, apparently not at all put out by the weather. She was beautiful.

"I did not think you would come."

She raised a brow at his comment, a curious look questioning his sentiment. "The rain," he elaborated, and rather foolishly, he thought. "Since you walk, I had thought you would not venture out in the damp."

"Oh, I hardly call this rain," she replied, removing her wrappings. He watched the way the fabric of her dress tightened across her chest as she moved. " 'Tis an inconsequential drizzle, and I would no more avoid it than I would a sunny day."

She looked at him and smiled again, in the reserved way she tended to have. She stood close to him, and he could see the collection of raindrops hanging with precarious grace on the fringe of her lashes. Beneath them, the mossy green of her eyes was even more inviting, the wet lashes complimenting their hue.

"I'm glad that you came," he blurted, and then looked away, wondering what on earth was the matter with him. "We have made a lot of progress," he indicated the newly arranged chaos of the library. Miss Ridley had a system, but it was beyond him. She sighed impatiently whenever he inquired as to her methods. "I am anxious to complete the project."

She looked somewhat chastened at the tone his voice had taken, and turned efficiently to where she had left off the day before.

He stared at the nape of her neck, at the sweet indent that lay below her hairline. "I might send the carriage for you, in future inclement weather, should you wish it." He hoped that she would, for then he would take the team and escort her himself.

A hand flicked in his direction. " 'Tis a kind offer, sir, but you would be depriving me of a great pleasure. I actually adore the rain – it's very English."

"Rain is English?"

"Not exclusively, no. But this type of rain," she paused in her work, and moved a step to the window. The mist still fell, blurring the scenery and heightening the color of the grass to a high emerald. Like her eyes, he thought. "This type of rain has a uniquely English quality. It was always different in Greece," she added.

He stared out the window as well, and they stood that way for some time, the sight strangely soothing. It was a day that called for indoor activities with friends and loved ones; card games, charades, teasing that began as fun and turned increasingly more annoying as the day wore on and goodwill evaporated. He'd experienced that sort of thing before, as a child, mostly with his younger sister Sarah.

It was the weather, he thought, that was making him remember, for Sarah and he, up to eternal mischief, would find the walls of Clybourn Manor closing in on rainy days. Beginning the day in a spirit of fun and adventure, they would inevitably come to blows after too much gloom and confinement.

He laughed at the memory, and seeing Miss Ridley's quizzical look, said, "My sister Sarah used to torment me on rainy days, which were interminable to us as children. I used to get her to hide, and then wouldn't come find her, just to rid myself of her company. But she would get her revenge, run crying to our brother, which would lead to punishment for me, as I was the older and she was a girl. Filled with remorse, she would then smuggle food to me as I sat alone in my room with no supper. She always was steady, in the end. It's too bad, really."

Miss Ridley gave him a grave look. "Where is she now?" she inquired.

Gideon sighed. "Lancashire. Married a fool of a viscount. Although she's two nice children. Still, can't stand the husband."

Miss Ridley looked piqued for a moment, and then laughed. "On rainy days I would sit inside with my father and he would read me classical texts."

"Sounds...absorbing."

"It wasn't quite so bad. He had a deep, lovely voice, and more often than not I'd doze right off." She looked suddenly surprised. "I suppose that was his goal all along!"

She sounded so put out that Gideon could not help but laugh. "Did

you never have a sister, or brother?"

"No, 'twas always just my parents and me. And Agatha. Oh!" She turned to the chair where her belongings lay. "That reminds me – Agatha did send the unguent she had promised. She says," she fished a parcel out and handed to him, "you are to apply it twice daily, in the morning and evening, and apply a warm compress over it for at least an hour. She did her best with the scent, but it may not be very agreeable. And she would like to know the results, if possible, for she's never made something precisely like this."

Gideon took the package, weighing its contents in his hand, strangely touched. No one had ever been interested in his pain before. In his naval career, or the war, but never how the weight of his wound affected him. "Thank you," he said, and turned abruptly away from Miss Ridley, wondering at the odd turn of his mood today.

He could hear the rustle of her movements behind him and knew she was returning to her work. He wished he could ask her just to sit, and talk to him, and leave the work for another day. But that was not Miss Ridley's style, and he wasn't overcome enough to not recognize the distance at which she held him.

Not that he could blame her, he supposed. For who was he to her, after all, but an employer? Or possibly even a disreputable rakehell, if talk from London had reached the village, which he supposed it was bound to do.

It chafed him. He had not been *pure*, not by any means, but if even half of the things whispered about him were true, it would make him nothing more than a rutting jackanapes.

He had enjoyed that world, once. And the joy of his brother's ire as each new exploit, real or imagined, reached his ears had done nothing to persuade Gideon to better ways.

Simeon had never thought of him as anything more than a frivolous slouch, a pretty boy grown into a foolish man. Perhaps if he'd expected something of him, had provided his younger brother with something more than dismissive criticism...

Gideon cut off that turn of thoughts, knowing it led only to a brick wall. He'd long ago learned the emptiness of hoping for approval from his brother. As far as he could ascertain, Simeon was hollow on the inside, his heart a lead weight in the vacancy of his chest.

He sneaked a glance at Miss Ridley, where she was bent over her desk, poring over several open volumes, her customary quill in hand.

Her hair was drawn back, but loosely, and he could see the tendency it took to curl. Perhaps the damp had freed it. He said a thanks for the rain, quite liking the look of slight dishevelment. She was always so proper, so bloody reserved, and he was glad to see at least this small confirmation of his belief that she was anything but

beneath the surface...

...Under those layers of clothing, her flesh warm and soft, eager for his touch. He would caress her full breasts, bring them to his mouth –

"Sir? Are you quite well?" Miss Ridley's voice came from behind him, and he could feel her glance resting on his back. God, but he was beginning to act like a loon.

" 'Tis..." he paused, knowing the impossibility of sharing his real thoughts with her. " 'Tis my wound. It does...*throb* some in wet weather." For emphasis he gathered his cane from where it rested against the wall, and leaned on it, the familiar silver handle cool beneath his palm.

"Perhaps you should try some of the unguent. I know it may seem unusual to you, but Agatha has practiced the healing arts for many years. She saw me through scarlatina as a child. My mother trusted her implicitly."

Curious, and eager to change the direction of his thoughts, he asked, "Forgive me, but how long has it been since your parents...?"

Miss Ridley swallowed. "It will be two years for my father in the fall, and three for my mother."

"It must be very difficult for you, being alone."

He could see the touch of defiance in her shrug. "It is the lot dealt to me, and I must make do. I consider myself fortunate to have had the family I did. One could not have asked for better parents."

Gideon laughed shortly, and hurried to explain as he saw her look of offense. "I mean no offense. I was merely recalling my sentiments to the opposite concerning my brother. I deemed it the height of universal injustice to have him as my guardian."

Miss Ridley seemed appeased, and said, "Having met him, I can understand your feelings." She blushed, and turned her head away. "Forgive me! I did not mean to insult your brother."

Gideon raised a hand, halting her apology. "I believe I expressed the basic nature of my feeling toward my brother the other day, and I would not attempt to bore you with a detailed account of his unfavorable nature. It would take all day."

Miss Ridley smiled, a big genuine smile, free of all normal restraint and caution. Gideon found himself grinning back, something in the pit of his belly warming and moving through him with the heat and force of flame. They stood that way, smiling at each other, until Miss Ridley recalled herself and looked away.

But it was too late. He laughed out loud, beginning to feel a bit of gratitude to his brother: if anything, Simeon's high-handed verbal attack had provided him and Miss Ridley with some common ground.

"My lord, you are at home!"

The enthusiastic squeal of an unknown female voice brought his

head sharply up, calling his attention to the library door. Two women stood there, a mother and daughter by the looks of it, and they watched him with identical interest.

"We made free to see ourselves in, my lord, as there was no answer at your door," the older one said as the younger one gazed at him with large eyes.

They looked simultaneously to Miss Ridley beside him with evident surprise. He felt more than saw Miss Ridley recoil, for she was visible only in the corner of his eye. Her discomfort palpable, she turned away and began stocking the shelf behind her.

He was going to have to start locking his door, he decided. "Might I be of some assistance?"

"I am Mrs. Hubert Coopersmith, and I believe you have met my daughter, Lydia." Mrs. Hubert Coopersmith puffed up proudly and Lydia curtsied at him. "We have come to welcome you to Littleover, my lord."

Mindful of the sudden change come over Miss Ridley, and unable to completely dismiss these unwanted visitors without a show of unwarranted rudeness, he bit back a spurt of annoyance and said, "Won't you come into the drawing room?" He escorted the women out of the library, silently cursing the interruption of what was proving to be a highly enjoyable day.

They were just moving through the door when the girl asked, "Is Thea your servant?" Though the question was put with wide-eyed guilelessness, the sheer volume of her voice, so obviously intended to reach Miss Ridley across the room, denoted a more spiteful intent.

Gideon cursed silently again, and hurried them out of the library.

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Thea focused on the spines of the books at eye level, some with the telltale creases of repeated readings, others new and unblemished, never opened at all. She reached out, caressing the soft leather with her fingertips. It was all she could do for the moment, stare in frozen apprehension at the titles before her.

She had seen Lydia's look, the start of surprise followed quickly by a derisive smirk at finding Thea in the Captain's house. And she had heard the implication in the word servant, making Thea's presence, in the space of that one question, inferior, insignificant. Questionable.

Thea ground her teeth. *A servant?* Lydia was one to speak.

Lydia was the daughter of a merchant, and though he was the richest man in Littleover, his money had come from trade, and was hardly likely to ever buy Lydia that what she most coveted – entrance into fine society. Thea's father had been a gentleman, a scholar, and her mother had been the daughter of a baron, and she could not help

but bristle at Lydia's unwarranted air of superiority.

She would seep her poison to Captain Birch. She would do it the way she'd asked that question, apparent innocence masking spiteful intent. She would raise the dying rumors about Thea and John Godfrey, and Captain Birch would begin to wonder, to question her character, and perhaps find himself no longer requiring her services.

Lydia was probably doing it right now.

Thea leaned her head, letting the books before her support her weight, the scent of leather and paper strong and familiar. She did not want to lose this position. She could not! There was Agatha's medicine, and food, and stores for winter, which seemed to come faster every year...

But Lydia would insinuate, and Captain Birch would listen, and rethink his choice, and...

Stop! She admonished herself, and moved away from the bookshelf, intent on returning to work. But one glance at the papers before her, the catalogue she'd only really just begun, so thorough and detailed, full of all the pertinent information of Captain Birch's library, and she knew she could not concentrate.

She moved to the window, nervous. Yes, she was afraid to lose her job, but she was also afraid – and it was very silly, too – of what Captain Birch would think.

He liked her, she thought, or at least respected her abilities and intelligence, and the idea of his opinion altering was upsetting. She didn't want him to know the rumors, the words that had been tossed about when John had coldly abandoned her to marry another. She wanted this one person, at least, to think of her without thinking of the unfortunate events of that summer. With a start that was nearly as unsettling as Lydia's appearance, she realized she wanted the Captain to like her.

She was defenseless when John married, abandoned by the one person with whom she'd found shelter, left open to abuse by his very desertion. He'd been cold enough to remind her that he'd made no promises, no spoken vow of his intent. But anyone would see – did see – that his every action was an acknowledgement of his intent. His very presence at her side, his sunny smile beaming with open admiration, his hand placed perhaps a tad too long at the curve of her waist. His intent was obvious to all, and they had not even heard the secret things, the whispers and sighs that had fallen in the private moments between them.

Thea fought back the urge to yell. Her instinct was to grab her cloak and leave, but she quelled that, too. She would wait, and see what the Captain said, and not provide him with an easy means of dismissing her.

There was a sound outside the library, the unmistakable tap-tap-tap of paws on the stone floor. Thea looked up just as Thor and Helen appeared in the door. In the absence of Captain Birch, the sun around which their canine world revolved, they settled for her, and bounded into the room with uncontained animal joy. She steeled herself against the onslaught; nevertheless, their joyous affection nearly knocked her to the ground. Thor circled her, while Helen rose on his hind legs, resting his paws on her chest, and stared her right in the eye. His tongued lolled from his mouth in wet abandon, and he looked ready to kiss her.

"No, no!" Thea tried to sound calm, and commanding, as she had no desire for quite this much slobbering affection. Helen tilted his head, as though contemplating her request, and then decided against compliance. He leaned in, and licked her in a wet and thorough trail from chin to forehead.

"Ah!" She moved back in reflex, and tripped over Thor, who was wrapped tightly around her legs. She landed on her backside, sending the dogs into paroxysms of delight at what they perceived was a new game. They were on her in an instant, yapping, and slurping, and Thea could only raise her arms in a feeble attempt at keeping herself dry. "Eep!"

There was a sudden sound, and the dogs shifted, giving her room to breathe. She rose up onto her elbows and pushed past one furry rump to find Captain Birch peering down at her with amused concern. Behind him, in the doorway, stood Lydia and her mother, looking absolutely horrified.

Thea watched them watching her, unable to think of a thing to say or do.

"Are you alright, Miss Ridley?" The Captain was still looking at her; she could see his eyes from over Thor's back. The sound of his voice seemed to recall the dogs to their business, and Thor leaned casually over and gave her a big sloppy kiss on the ear.

Lydia made a small noise of disgust, and it was Thea undoing. She began to laugh. And laugh. The entire scenario was simply so ridiculous, especially when compared to the tension she'd felt a few moments ago, that she could do nothing but roar, the release of laughter only sending her into further paroxysms.

She fell back onto the floor, a rolling, shaking mess of hysterical mirth, as Captain Birch took a last hesitant look at her, and escorted his guests out.

Within moments blue eyes peered down at her again from between the jostling bodies of the dogs. Thea, regaining some sensibility, pushed herself up onto her elbows. With a sharp command from their master, the dogs made reluctant room for her to rise.

"Are you alright?" Captain Birch extended a hand to aid her as he asked the question. It was a brief contact, her fingers enclosed in his warm palm for no longer than it took for her to stand, but it was startling nevertheless. It was the first time he'd touched her since the incident on the ladder.

She knew the shape of his hands well: they were broad, with long, blunt fingers, dotted with small scars and marks. She had not known the feel of his hand; the rough skin of his palm, the surface coarsened with calluses that bespoke a life far harsher than that befitting his status.

It was the hand of a warrior.

Thea nodded, and looked down at her rumpled skirts, straightening them so that she could avoid looking the Captain in the eye. Embarrassment flooded her, and the odd giddiness that followed hilarity. She was standing awfully close to him.

"Thor! Helen! Out!" The dogs whined their protest, but obeyed, and quit the room amid a flurry of playful yaps. "Bloody dogs," he sighed.

She chanced a glance at him, to see the apparent irritation belied by a smile, though he tried to stifle it for her benefit. "It's fine," Thea said, unable to suppress a grin from tugging at her lip. "They were only playing."

He laughed, and ran a hand over his mouth, amused. "Well, their play left you slightly worse for wear, I'm afraid." He reached out, and lifted a strand of hair that had come loose from her tight bun. He tucked it behind her ear, gently, barely touching her as he did so. Thea's breath caught in her throat, and she thought his fingers would linger at her neck, could feel the pause as his hand hovered so close to her skin.

"But unharmed," he continued after what seemed like an unnaturally long moment, in an odd, distant sort of voice. And then his hand was gone, and he was turning away, and Thea felt a stirring in her stomach that had nothing to do with upset at all.

–

Thereafter, Thea found it improbably difficult to concentrate on work. She could not disabuse herself of the notion that the Captain was looking at her. Yet every time she chanced a sly glance in his direction, his attention was elsewhere. He may very well have forgotten her presence all together.

The Captain was silent, sitting idle at his desk, gazing out the window in contemplation of nature, or heaven knew what else. Yet quite often when she turned her back, she felt a telltale frisson of awareness flow down the back of her neck, the sensation of his gaze.

Perhaps if he could take himself off somewhere, far from her

where she wouldn't have to be so aware of his presence, of the way his large, lean frame fit into the chair behind his desk, one long leg folded over the other as he stared out the window, finger tapping against the thin white line of his scar in a sort of half-conscious caress.

Thea had a horrible thought. What if she wanted the Captain to be looking at her? What if all this nonsense were only some form of fantasy on her part? The Captain was handsome, she allowed, in a rough, virile way, so obviously hardened by the war, and his eyes were a fetching blue, open and clear as the summer sky. She was not immune, after all, to the sight of an attractive man, and one so very...manly.

The volume in her hands fell noisily onto the floor.

"Is something amiss, Miss Ridley?"

Inanely, she blushed when he spoke, the sound of his voice seeming much closer than it actually was. *For pity's sake*, she chided herself, *he's all the way across the room*. But his voice was as warm and deep as though he were standing right behind her. A disconcerting notion.

"Not at all," she answered, keeping her head averted. "I am clumsy today."

"Hm."

Now that was an odd, knowing sound for him to make, as if he were fully conscious of why she should be so clumsy today.

She bent down to gather the book, and stole another discreet glance. He was still staring out the window, contemplating the rolling slope of his lawn. The mist had turned to rain, and the shadows of raindrops played across his face. A small furrow marked the space between his brows, and his finger moved absently across the white scar on his lip.

Roundly chastising herself as a ninny, and with a resolute mental shake, she turned, and was thereupon able to apply herself to the work before her with a fair amount of success. She bent over the desk, quill in hand, and schooled her attention to the labyrinthine pages of the developing catalogue.

It was mid-afternoon before she stopped again, stretching to alleviate some of the tension in her stiff back, for it was slow and painstaking work. There were so many volumes, and so many categories, and sub-categories, titles to cross-reference –

Captain Birch was looking at her.

Lost in thought, she had turned towards the Captain's desk. And here she was, arrested in mid-stretch – hands clenched high above her head, back arched, thinking somewhere in the back of her brain that this was not the time to have forgotten his presence.

Captain Birch was looking at her, and in such a way that made her

know that all of her intuition had been right, that he was just as aware of her as she was of him. She was relieved for a moment to have been so right, and then stunned, so stupidly stunned that she just stood there with her arms raised high above her head until she realized how open the position made her, somehow so vulnerable and available to the intensity of his gaze.

Her arms drifted down, two appendages moving of their own accord to hang at her side. Captain Birch *was* looking at her, and she was so shocked she could do nothing but look back, her mouth going open in a small 'O'.

He didn't move, only watched her from across his desk, his eyes locked into hers.

The blue burned into Thea, warmed her face and moved down along her spine and into the sudden weakness of her knees. She felt it low in her abdomen, a small, shaky fire that spread through her like fear.

She was afraid. There was something so open and hungry in the Captain's look – *Gideon*, her mind whispered, the intimacy of his gaze forcing itself upon her, not allowing her to think of him as anything else. *Gideon*, her mind whispered again, relishing the familiarity, the closeness of the word.

Overwhelmed, she stepped backward at the sound, as if he'd heard, and struck her hip sharply against the desk, knocking down a pile of books. They slid off, thumping as they hit the carpet one by one, the noise startling her gaze away from his. For a breath she stared at them, her attention mercifully arrested by a pile of jumbled texts on the floor, and then ducked hastily to retrieve them – moved, turned, ran – anything at all to get away from the shock of what she had recognized in his eyes: *longing*.

–

His injured knee made kneeling awkward, but he did it. Knelt down next to Miss Ridley and helped pick up the stack of books she'd just knocked to the floor.

She made a small sound, trying in some soft way to dissuade him from assisting her. The reason she did not want his aid was his reason in giving it: It brought him so close to her that his sleeve brushed against hers as they moved. She grasped a large heavy book in both hands and made to rise. Gideon forestalled the motion by placing his hand on the green leather cover. He made no other movement, just let his palm rest there, exerting no physical force at all.

Miss Ridley made another small vibration of protest, something halfway between a sigh and a hiss, but she did not stand. She stared at his hand on the book, a frown working between her brows. She knew,

and he knew, that when she looked up, he was going to kiss her.

Eventually she raised her gaze to his and Gideon's breath caught. Her eyes, such eyes... He lifted his hand from the book and brought it to rest at the nape of her neck. Then he leaned forward and gently touched his mouth to hers.

As anyone would expect of a young man endowed with fortune, rank and looks, Gideon Birch had been with many women. Many women in many ways, as a former cohort used to say. He had had his share of infatuation, and once or twice a near-miss with heartbreak. But never, in all his days, had he experienced anything as sweet as Theadosia Ridley's kiss.

Her warm, wet lips were against his, her scent of paper, ink and rain was around him. He felt himself trembling from the joy of it. He did not try to contain it, only let the emotion rise up and through him, until he wanted to sing.

"Stop!"

Gideon stumbled onto his backside as Miss Ridley, with a great deal of clumsy force, pushed away from him. She stood hurriedly, and turned her back to him, though he could see the heave of her shoulders and the hand she pressed over her face. A corner of his mouth quirked in tenderness. She was so lovely like this, so charmingly flustered, so –

"You have no right!"

So very angry. Gideon stared up at her, utterly confused.

"I am not – " she exhaled. Anger made spots of red appear in blotchy patterns across her face, which must have made Gideon smile, for she bit out, "Don't you dare laugh at me!"

She was genuinely offended, and Gideon was instantly contrite. "It isn't what you think," he explained, trying to get up. The awkward manner in which he'd sat down made rising gracefully difficult, and his knee groaned in protest. He might have even twisted it when she'd pushed him, for it pinched terribly as he finally got to his feet. Through a second nature born of long practice, he hid his discomfort and cast an offhand look for his cane, unfortunately left at his desk across the room. He rested his weight on his good leg.

"I am not so naïve as you think, though I am merely a village girl." She shot him a defiant look.

"I do not think you naïve – "

"Only a village girl, with nothing to recommend her and no one to shield her. Quite an easy target!"

"Now see here!" Gideon was going to let her have her say until she calmed a bit, but matters seemed to be escalating. Miss Ridley's intense anger did not fit with the sweetness of her kiss a moment ago. A kiss given willingly, and not under duress.

"Don't bother denying it!" She was pacing in front of him, tossing the words over her shoulder. "It's all so pitifully obvious!"

"I would thank you not to put words into my mouth." Gideon might have been angry, too, if he weren't so confused.

"Do you take me for a fool?" Obviously, she thought that he did. "Where do you think that you are? Do you think we are so far removed from the world? That news from London does not travel here? Do you think," she took a deep, shaky breath, "that I do not know what you are?"

Gideon stared at her, confoundedly following the verbal barrage. And then realization dawned, piercing with a sickening hiss the elation that had risen through him. A jumbled mixture of feelings rose in its wake – dread, fury, and disappointment, each fighting for prominence.

"And what news exactly," he asked in clipped tones, "has traveled from London, Miss Ridley? What am I?"

A touch of something akin to embarrassment moved in her eyes. "A...it is known that you..." To his gratification, she was obviously uncomfortable. She would not even look at him now, but gazed to the side. Gideon knew what she meant, of course, and also knew that she was probably trying to find a less explicit term for rake. He waited, forcing her to say it, to put a name to her allegations against him.

"It can come as no surprise to you that you are reputed to be a great philanderer." She glanced at him quickly, and turned, wrapping her arms around herself as she began to pace before him. "This... It must not happen again. The fact that I am dependent on this income is no secret. But make no mistake, I will leave your employ if anything..." She stopped her pacing, and bit down on her lip.

Gideon's initial reaction was to tell her to go ahead and bloody leave. Hurt, and a stupid sense of betrayal stung him badly. He had, from the first moments of knowing her, felt for Miss Ridley in a foolish, romantic, unprecedented way, and the fact that she would dismiss it all as the behavior of a scoundrel was...well, quite right on her part, if he was honest with himself. He was a scoundrel, or had been one in a previous life, and she'd be a fool to think otherwise.

Yet he longed to convince her how unjust, how untrue this opinion was. He had thought, for some ridiculous reason he could not seem to recall, that Miss Ridley, his lovely translator, could see beyond all that. Could see beyond all that he had once been – a rake and a warrior – to the heart and thoughts and emotions beneath. Absurd, fatuous notions.

Should the follies of youth haunt him even now? Apparently so. Haunt him hand in hand with the memories of smoke-filled bloody agony.

Miss Ridley was still standing there, and though he knew she was doing the right thing for herself in rejecting him, a sharp disappointment gave rise to anger. How cruel to give a man hope, only to thus snatch it away.

"You may ease your apprehensions, Miss Ridley. Even now there are a dozen women upstairs craving my attentions," he said coarsely. "I'm sure I shall be easily diverted, and your employment shall be quite secure."

Two roses of color marred the skin of her cheeks. She looked absolutely mortified. With careful, controlled motions, Gideon moved away from her to his desk, where he gathered his cane with no apparent hurry, and made his way from the room.

"Gideon."

His name was a whisper on her lips, a soft caress of breath against his ear. *"Gideon,"* she repeated with urgency, sliding her silken body over his. Her warm tongue circled his ear just as her legs parted above him. She was softness, and heat, and he had never been so aroused in his life. He rested his hands on the sweet indent of her waist, and urged her closer.

"Impatient," she laughed, and ground herself against his cock. Gideon let out a gasp, and clutched her tighter. She gasped now, and stared down at him, her hair a fall around them. Her gaze bore into his, and the ache in his cock was matched only by the one in his heart.

She kissed him in hunger and ardor. "We've all the time in the world, my love." She took him as she spoke, deep within herself, until Gideon was crying her name.

"Thea!"

The sound of his own voice woke him. He twisted in confusion, for the briefest second wondering why the bed was empty. Thor raised his head in inquiry from his post at the foot of the bed, made a foolishly cat-like sound, and settled back to sleep, merely chagrined and no longer surprised by his master's behavior.

Gideon rubbed his eyes, and kicked at the sheets tangled around his legs. He rose, sitting at the edge of the bed as his heartbeat returned to normal. A sliver of moonlight crept through the closed curtains into the inky chamber, lighting a white path across the carpet. Two o'clock, he thought, no later than three, and nowhere close to dawn.

He had at first put it down to simple deprivation, his body's way of complaining that he hadn't been with a woman in quite some time. Such erotic dreams were not uncommon, and usually not unwelcome, and he had not been particularly surprised at first to dream of Miss Ridley in a sexual fashion; he didn't try to deceive himself into thinking his desire for her had faded.

But the dreams persisted. Night after night of Miss Ridley naked and willing, and with the exception of one dream where she'd only embraced him, always over him. Gideon was always mad with lust, and she always smiled, and said his name, but tonight...tonight was the first time she had ever called him 'my love.'

My love, and the breathless, hopeful sensation of the dream encompassed him until he growled in frustration. Thor poked his head up again, ears perked forward as though asking, 'What, again?'

"Go back to sleep. It's only me, losing my wits." Thor did just that

as Gideon searched the floor for his discarded robe, envying his dog the ability to sleep so well. The dreams always woke him, robbing him of precious hours of rest to pace the room in frustration and unspent lust.

It wasn't just the physical part of the dreams that troubled him, torturous though that unfulfilled desire was. If it were only that he could find a woman and be done with it. What was truly disturbing was the longing the dreams engendered, a plaintive yearning that spilled over into his waking life. A pathetic need for Miss Ridley alone, and for all of her.

And though he did his best to avoid her – had stopped going to the library and offering up the pretense of assistance – she kept coming to him in his dreams, the embodiment of the fantasies he would not allow into his waking moments.

He rubbed a rough hand over his face, frustrated and baffled at the irony of it all.

For so long he'd wanted to be alone. All those years of claustrophobic shipboard life he'd dreamed of space and solitude. How well he recalled the nights spent staring out at endless black oceans, yearning for nothing more than his own quiet space. And here he was, having it, feeling nothing so much as empty and...

Gideon actually groaned aloud as the realization struck him. He was lonely.

His was a humble dream, he thought, and he had been amply rewarded. He had been given a title, money, a small amount of fame and the peace he'd longed for. Miraculously, he had somehow managed to not only survive so much killing, he had done so physically intact. He was not maimed; he merely had an injured knee. A little pain when so many had died, good men, probably better than he would ever be.

And now he was lonely.

Gideon snarled as he flung himself from the bed. The movement sent a sharp pain through his knee, which made him even angrier, but did not prevent him from pacing. He had no right to be lonely. It was all *her* doing, he thought. He would have been fine if she hadn't come into his life and stirred up emotions that were better left untouched. Desire and want and need. The longing for companionship. The longing for a simple touch.

He remembered what it had been like, during the war, all the countless hours spent dreaming of life away from battle, how it would all be so easy and perfect. What he hadn't envisioned was the pervasive sense of pointlessness that would plague him. His experience had pushed him to some distant limit of human endurance, and though he had only longed for a quiet, normal life, it seemed that

would not be enough. Having come so close to death, become casual in its presence, he realized that there was no time for a so-called regular life. Life had to be lived, irrefutably and absolutely, for it did not allow for hesitation or half-measures.

He fought to clear his thoughts.

A sudden idea of inviting his sister Sarah came to him, and with it a rush of relief. Sarah with her humor and friendship and children would provide some measure of distraction – hell, he thought with a spurt of generosity, he'd even invite his mother. She alone provided more distraction than any one man could possibly need.

It was a wonderful idea, whether for the anticipation of their company or the notion of having something to occupy him he was not sure. He grabbed a candle and hurried to the library to pen the letter of invite, before he could change his mind.

"You're quite sure it's alright? The sun is not too hot? Perhaps I should – "

"Theadosia, I am fine! Cease your fussing."

Thea bit back a smile, thrilled to realize that Agatha felt well enough to scold her. "You needn't be cross. I am only concerned for your welfare." Thea couldn't resist a final plumping of the pillow behind Agatha's back.

"I can hardly imagine that it will be a bit of sunlight finally doing me in," Agatha harrumphed.

"Of course not. And I know you've been feeling much better these days, but I should hate to see you overexert yourself – it might bring about a relapse."

Agatha looked at her with an odd expression, and appeared to decide against a retort. Only when Thea was convinced that her old friend was warm enough and comfortable enough did she settle herself on the ground next to her, folding her arms across her knees. It was a brilliant day, warm and bright, and she had managed to get Agatha from the house into a chair in her mother's rose garden. Even now, though overgrown and untended, the old familiar peace of it washed over her and that, Thea supposed, would make her mother very happy indeed.

"Thea, dear." Agatha paused for a long time. Despite the warmth, she had a blanket tucked securely around her legs, and her favorite blue shawl about her shoulders. Thea was sure the shawl was as old as she was; it had certainly been around forever. It never failed to remind her of her childhood. "Thea, you cannot be afraid of a relapse."

Thea smiled. "Are you feeling that much better, then? Shall we send to London for dancing shoes?"

Agatha looked down at her, smiling. "I am feeling more myself than I have in months, if not years. But I am an old woman, one that is not long for this world."

Agatha rested her hand on Thea's cheek, halting her reply. "It is so, my dear girl. We cannot pretend otherwise, though we may long to do so. I have been well these days, yes, and how grateful I am for it. But it is this time that should be considered a relapse – a brief foray into an Agatha of old. The sickness will come again, and eventually – soon – it will take me."

Thea turned her cheek away from Agatha's hand, stung. "You are very morbid today. Foolish me, I thought we would have a lovely day in the sunshine."

"Now you are upset, but it must be said. I will not have you

deluding yourself. You must be prepared, Theadosia. It is all that I can offer you."

Thea bit the inside of her cheek to keep her emotions in check. Foolishly, she wanted to rant at Agatha and cry at the same time. She knew Agatha was looking at her and could probably guess her thoughts, so she kept her face turned away, pressed into her arm.

"I would stay with you if I could, dear girl," Agatha said after a long silence. "If I could have seen you settled..."

Not likely, thought Thea. The one man she had ever envisioned marrying had chosen another and any future prospects were non-existent.

"You may forget that I was married," Agatha said wistfully. "As do I at times, it was all so long ago. And of course I have been luckier than most women, for I have seen some of the world, and have had you, dear girl, to care for. But I confess the best period of my life was the brief time with my Henry, for he was a dear man and very fond of me, too."

The bittersweet tone of her voice sent a pang through Thea. A pair of blue eyes came to mind. Blue eyes that had looked at her with such bold intensity that she flushed even now. Blue eyes that she'd last seen filled with hurt. How astonishing that anything she said could injure the Captain. As though he genuinely cared for her.

Foolish girl, Thea interrupted herself. The Captain probably genuinely cared for one thing only. And it certainly wasn't words.

"He must have been very wonderful, to have deserved you," Thea said.

"He was indeed." Agatha chuckled. "And though I am independent and have found much satisfaction in my life, I can never forget the comfort of being cared for. You care for me," she added, seeing Thea's expression. "My own child could do no better."

No amount of cheek biting would stem Thea's tears now, and she could only press Agatha's dry hand in response.

"But there is something in the way a husband cares for his wife," Agatha continued, "that cannot be found elsewhere. That is what I wanted for you, Thea. And to know that you will not be alone after I am gone. I do so worry for you."

Thea wiped a sleeve across her eyes. She wanted to assure Agatha, but had not the heart to do so. To make any assurance, to say anything, would be a confirmation of the seriousness of Agatha's condition. Under no delusions, she simply could not verbalize it.

"You deserve some ease in your life, Thea. You have borne more than you should."

"Less than many," Thea replied, finally determined to put a brave face forward. Agatha was worried for her, but she had no idea of the

depth of Thea's own fear. She did not know about the anxieties that kept Thea awake at night, wondering how she would survive with no one in the world, not one single person to call her family. Agatha did not know how terrified Thea was of losing not only her, but of a life alone on the edge of poverty.

Nor would she. Thea would keep her concerns to herself, as she had done thus far. She was sure that any undue worry on Agatha's part would only exacerbate her condition. So she forced a smile and tried for the flippant tone of her youth, from the time when she had actually been carefree.

"What could a man do for me, Agatha, other than issue orders on how I should go about my life? I should say you know me well enough to realize how well that would go over." Thea waved a hand dismissively.

Agatha chuckled and closed her eyes. "There is companionship, my girl. Love. Familiarity and routine. Many things which make life more agreeable."

Thea gently lifted the corner of Agatha's shawl, and rubbed it between two fingers. It was surely the softest thing she'd ever touched. She bit back her tears. "Companionship, love and routine? Why, I could get a dog for all that!"

But later, after Agatha had gone up to nap, Thea felt restless and altogether prickly, so she collected her sun hat and set off walking. She reflected on Agatha's words. She would not allow, even to herself, how badly she longed for all the things her friend had mentioned. Despite external appearances, Thea was not inured to the longings of the heart. Her temperament had cooled out of necessity, and after her bitter experience with John.

How long it has been, she realized with a burst of satisfaction, *since I have thought of him*. The ache of his defection was still in place, though, and satisfaction quickly turned melancholic. She had loved John, but he had been her friend as well, and at times she missed his friendship more than anything else. He had had such an agreeable disposition, and was ever sending her into fits of laughter. Being with him had never failed to divert her from her worries. There was hardly anything to laugh about in her life anymore.

She walked on, lost in thought, unaware of her direction until she crested the hill that looked down at Captain Birch's house. Habit, she supposed, her feet used to the path.

It really was a lovely house, she thought as she slowed to a halt, large and charmingly nestled between two verdant hills. Birch House, they were calling it now, after his new title, though Thea had yet to hear the Captain refer to himself as such. She'd never called him by anything other than his naval title, and he'd never corrected her.

It was one of his many idiosyncrasies. He was certainly a man of means, and yet his house, or the little Thea had glimpsed beyond the library, was largely unfurnished and far from befitting his status. Such servants as he had were either too busy or too slothful to make an appearance and to Thea's knowledge he never entertained. There were none of the comings and goings she'd anticipated when he'd arrived in the neighborhood.

She had not seen him but once since the incident in the library. Since he'd kissed her and she'd said all the things she did, and his blue eyes had turned wounded. She'd left that day feeling like a beast, no matter how she tried to convince herself that all wrongdoing was his.

Had she any faith in her intuition, she would not have been able to doubt his evident sincerity – everything had felt so very temptingly true.

But the truth was that Captain Lord Gideon Birch was a London rogue, and she, Miss Theadosia Rose Ridley, was a village girl of established poor judgment, and one could not dismiss the facts.

She'd continued going to work as usual, but he was no longer there. It should have made her job easier, but she found concentration elusive, her mind wandering past the library doors and into his house, wondering where he was.

He'd come into the library just once, greeting her with a curt nod and the crisp syllables of her name, and going to ransack his desk in search of something vital enough to have brought him into her company. Thea had made a pretense of studying the lists laid out on the table before her, but really she had watched him from the corner of her eye the entire time. He looked tired and rumpled, with stark lines and shadows upon his face. His limp was more pronounced than she'd ever seen it and he was actually muttering to himself as he went through the desk.

He'd left soon after, with nary a glance or comment in her direction.

Thea looked down at Birch House, lights beginning to twinkle against the coming dusk, wondering what the Captain was doing. She wondered, for the first time, if he was as lonely as she was.

"Hello."

Thea nearly jumped out of her skin. She whirled in the direction of the voice, hand clutched across her pounding heart. She had thought the library deserted.

Instead she beheld a small boy seated at the Captain's desk. The large chair very nearly engulfed him as he watched her with huge brown eyes.

"I am Alexander Felton."

"Well, Alexander Felton," Thea said, regaining a normal heartbeat, "you gave me quite a fright."

"I didn't mean to," he said, managing to sound both sheepish and defensive. He looked down at his shoes, and Thea, over her fright, began to wonder who he was. Obviously the Captain had some guests after all.

"Alright. Though you will have to answer for it if my hair turns white from shock."

He giggled and hopped down from the chair. He was a handsome lad, tall and sturdy, with a shock of brown hair. "I'm exploring."

"Are you indeed?" Thea removed her hat, and set it in its usual place. She cast a quick eye over the library, but her stacks and papers seemed untouched. "And have you discovered anything of interest?"

Alexander shook his head and sighed. "No."

"Oh, dear, all these books and nothing of interest," Thea teased.

"I'm not looking to *learn*," he explained, coming round the desk. "I'm looking for adventure."

Thea bit back a smile. He was so very earnest, and, well, adorable. "I can't help you there, I'm afraid. I'm very poor at adventure." To say the least.

"Never fear, miss." He came to stand next to her. Up close, Thea noticed a rent at the corner of his pocket and an ink stain on his finger. "I am rather good at it. That is, my father is always claiming he's never seen a boy with such a knack for nuisance, though I know he's not really angry, you see. And my uncle has had a great many adventures, and I shall be just like him." He actually puffed up his small chest, obviously proud of the accomplishments and plans of his young life.

And the uncle he mentioned could only be –

"Alexander Philip Felton, did I not specifically and with great clarity tell you to remain in your room?"

Young Alexander blanched and swallowed at the rebuke coming from what had to be his mother. She moved into the room in a swirl

of green skirts and though she was petite and obviously a lady, even Thea wanted to step back. She came to a halt before her son, hands perched atop her hips. Alexander's eyes grew even larger until they glowed like coals in his tan face.

"I'm certain the day shall come when you will heed your mother – I only hope I'm alive to see it." She ruffled his hair with a bit more force than necessary, but Alexander smiled. "Only tell me you haven't destroyed any of Uncle Gideon's property."

Alexander shook his head effusively. "No, ma'am. I've only been exploring."

His mother aimed her eyes heavenward. The motion drew her attention to Thea and she turned, aiming a bright smile at her. "Hello. You must be Miss Ridley."

Thea fought the urge to gape, astonished by the idea that the Captain's sister should know who she was. She could only have arrived yesterday. "Yes," she managed, wondering what exactly the Captain had told his sister. Having met his brother, she was also more than a bit wary.

"I do hope my son hasn't caused any damage." She cast a harrowing look at the boy, who wisely decided to take himself from the room, headed presumably for his chambers.

"Not all," Thea answered. "I believe the books were a bit off-putting to his idea of adventure."

The Captain's sister looked around the room, taking in the chaos. Even at this stage, after a considerable amount of work, it looked like the site of an explosion. "My brother told me you speak fluent Greek," she said, turning her attention back to Thea. "How remarkable. I never could get the knack of languages, much to the eternal dismay of my mother and governess. Oh, merciful heavens!" she exclaimed, looking positively vexed. "How rude you must think me! I am Lady Sarah Felton."

Thea did not think her rude at all. In fact, she found her rather charming and genuine, and her fears that she was like the Captain's brother were mollified. "Theadosia Ridley, my lady."

Lady Sarah smiled again. She was shorter than Thea, and bore no apparent resemblance to the Captain. But she was very pretty, brown hair styled in a sleek chignon, and her lovely dress could only be the latest fashion, though Thea could only guess.

"And you do not find this work at all daunting, Miss Ridley?"

"At times," Thea replied, offering a small smile. "But I find it very thrilling, as well. My father was a great lover of the written word and I fear I am rather bookish myself."

"Then it would appear fate has led my brother to the right place. He is very fortunate to have you."

Thea had not yet finished blushing at that comment when the gentleman himself strode into the room. Her chest constricted, and a warm sensation spread down her spine. It was the first time she had seen him in nearly two weeks. He looked taller, thinner and more handsome than she remembered.

She did not know how to greet him.

"How timely, Gideon," Lady Sarah said. "I was just telling Miss Ridley how lucky you are to have her. This library project is decidedly colossal."

Captain Birch wore a strained smile and kept his eyes on his sister. "Right on all counts, Sarah."

Just then the sound of breaking glass came from another room. "I'll have his hide!" Lady Sarah exclaimed. She spun on her heel and hurried from the room without a parting glance.

Thea and the Captain were alone. Her breath froze in her chest and she did not know where to look. She had been alone with the Captain in this room countless times; they had worked together, talked, even laughed. Only now everything was completely different.

Just over there, her eyes slid across the floor to the rug near her worktable, he had kissed her. He had placed his hands upon her and pressed his lips against hers, and kissed her with a sweetness she would not have thought possible.

She knew she should simply turn and get back to work, but she was frozen in place as he appeared to be. She longed for him to stay, and talk to her as she worked. But he finally moved, nodding to her without actually looking at her, and left the room.

It was only as he was at the door did she realize he was walking without his cane.

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There were five of them in all: the Captain's sister, Sarah, and her children Alexander and Margaret; his seventeen-year-old niece, Felice; and his mother, Lady Helen, the dowager Countess of Clybourn.

Thea knew this for they each took a turn coming into the library throughout the course of the day. Felice, Thea was given to understand, was the Earl's daughter and anxiously awaiting her come-out the following year. She was a pretty girl, no more flighty than her age required, and not particularly interested in reading.

Margaret was nearly identical to her brother Alexander and did not say much, for she was quickly shooed from the library by her mother.

It was the dowager Countess to whom the Captain bore the greatest resemblance. She was a dignified woman, white-haired and stately, with the same blue eyes and chin as her son. She had come into the library actually looking for a book, and Thea had been more

than happy to help her make a selection. The Dowager evidently had a better grasp of languages than did her children.

Fortunately, none of them seemed to regard Thea with the same disdain as the Earl. To the contrary – they all behaved with perfect civility and even pleasantness.

A bevy of servants accompanied these five, and the normally quiet house had become quite boisterous. Occasional outbursts of shouting, crying and laughter punctuated the constant hum of noise, as if there were five times as many people in residence.

Thea stayed in the library, diligently trying not to be distracted by the hullabaloo. A difficult task, as so much noise intrigued her. Thea lived a life encased in quiet, and always had. Her father had been always reading and her mother working in her garden or resting. After she became ill, silent looks took the place of words in the already quiet Ridley household. Thea, her father and Agatha had simply been too afraid to speak.

This was a glimpse into a world Thea had never known.

Gradually, however, the noise died down, as the day drew to a close. Thea tidied her work area, collected her hat and went outside into the beautiful warm summer evening. She came upon the Captain and his guests just as she rounded the house. A small table had been set up with refreshments for the adults, while the children romped across the lawn. A maid Thea did not recognize was pouring what looked like lemonade, and arranging cakes on a tray.

"Are you off home, Miss Ridley?" Lady Sarah inquired upon spying Thea, who had stopped. This brought the attention of the others to her, though Thea kept her glance away from the Captain's.

"Indeed I am."

Lady Helen raised her head from her book. "It may be awhile – I don't see your carriage."

"Oh, there's no carriage, ma'am," Thea answered. "I walk home."

"Walk home!" Lady Helen said in appalled tones, as though the very idea of walking was too scandalous to mention. For all of her dignity, she did not seem a very robust woman. In fact she was rather thin, and pale.

Thea couldn't suppress a smile. "As I do every day. I enjoy it, you see."

"How far do you go?"

"No more than two miles. In fact, if you will excuse me..."

"What nonsense!" Lady Helen interrupted. "Two miles across the countryside alone. How can you allow such a thing, Gideon?"

The Captain looked blankly at his mother. She continued, "Miss Ridley is not some sort of-of village maid. Call the carriage and escort her home."

Thea's heart thudded into her stomach. "Oh, no, ma'am! 'Tis nothing for me, I love the – "

Lady Helen *tsked* her explanation away. "Nonsense, nonsense. Well, Gideon? What are you waiting for?"

The Captain glared at his mother for a moment, but did not argue. How could he? There was nothing he could possibly say before his mother and sister. He rose, and went around the house to the stables.

Though she might appear less than hearty, it was clear that Lady Helen's strength of will was very robust indeed.

Thea could do nothing but wait. She felt a mortified blush singeing her cheeks and made a show of watching the children play. The very last thing she wanted was to be alone with him. She could not even begin to imagine what she might say to him, or how to act in his presence. She would not even consider what he might be thinking at the prospect of driving her home.

In no time he rounded the corner, high on the seat of a shiny black conveyance. He got down and came to assist her in mounting. If Thea had not spent so much time watching him, she would not have noticed the small grimace that tightened his mouth. Thea felt a stab of guilt at the knowledge that his knee was paining him. It could not be easy for him to come up and down from the seat of his carriage.

He didn't say a word to her, or to his family, only got back into the rig and took the reins into his hands. With a wave, they were off.

They rode in silence. As unobtrusively as possible, Thea pressed herself against the edge of the curricle, avoiding the accidental touch of his arm or thigh. She concentrated on observing the passing scenery, as though she hadn't seen it a thousand times before. The Captain paid attention to the horses, obviously displeased with the arrangement.

So it was to her great surprise that not even halfway to her home, he pulled the curricle to a stop. He halted under the shade of an enormous oak tree and stared fixedly ahead, looking stern. Thea's heart sank. He could mean only one thing – to release her from her position. That kiss in the library, the things she'd said to him –

"Miss Ridley." Thea swallowed and turned to look at him. His profile was to her, his features unreadable. Then he turned and looked her straight in the eye. Thea felt an odd flipping sensation in her stomach, much as if a family of small birds had taken up residence there.

She waited, but he continued to stare at her. She maintained her silence, refusing to make this any easier on him.

"I kissed you," he said finally.

"Yes," she replied uncertainly.

"I thought we should acknowledge it, since going about as though

nothing had happened doesn't seem to be doing either one of us any good."

Thea nodded.

"I also want you to know that I'm not apologizing for it. I kissed you because I wanted to, very badly, and would do so again. In fact, Miss Ridley, I long to kiss you again. I find you to be the most desirable creature I have ever beheld."

Thea stared at him in shock. He didn't seem to be teasing; there was no hint of a smile or anything to belie his seriousness. She couldn't believe he was saying these things to her. At the same time, pleasure coursed through her at hearing them. Pleasure, and yearning. She could not speak.

A corner of his mouth lifted, highlighting the thin white line of his scar. "It's an undeniable fact and I will not pretend otherwise. I've been through enough in my life to realize that there's no point in pretense. I am a different man than I was in my youth," he said pointedly, and Thea knew he was addressing her comments about his reputation.

"Despite what you may have heard about me," he looked down at the reins clasped in his hands, "I am a gentleman. You have no need to fear me. Not at my house, not here, alone with me."

It had never even occurred to Thea to be afraid of him. He was too honorable for that. But as a man, and one who had freely admitted to desiring her, he was not above maneuvering matters to his own advantage. That was what frightened Thea. That, and the flicker of longing that the Captain's words had ignited within her.

She also recalled, vividly and painfully, all the things John Godfrey had said to her and how guilelessly she had believed him. Foolishness then would be outright stupidity now.

"Captain Birch," she steeled herself with resolve, "I am certain you intend me no injury. But surely you see that your comments can have no other effect? That the very opinions you have expressed here today can only be detrimental?

"We must move beyond this incident. We must forget that it ever happened, just as we will forget this conversation. You *are* a gentleman, and that is why you will comply with my request."

He laughed. "It would take a saint, Miss Ridley, and not a gentleman for that. Or perhaps a better man than me. You see, I cannot forget it."

Thea looked down. He couldn't know that she couldn't forget it either, that the last thing she thought of as she fell asleep was the feel of his mouth on hers. What would be the point? "You must," she said without a trace of the resolve she'd intended on showing. In fact, her tone was imploring.

And it seemed to have some effect on the Captain. "I won't mention it again, if it upsets you. But Thea," he took her chin in his hand and raised her head, "I will be thinking about it."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"Miss Ridley – might I call you Thea?"

"Of course," Thea answered. Lady Sarah was very friendly. Every time she came into the library, she stopped to talk to Thea.

"Do you think there might be anything of interest in this library to my son? A good book might help him stay out of mischief for an hour or two."

Mischief. Thea pursed her lips, concentrating on keeping her opinion from showing on her face. To say that young Alexander was mischievous was a laughable understatement. The boy was a whirlwind, leaving havoc in his wake.

He wasn't a bad boy; he merely could not contain his impulses. Unfortunately, most of these impulses resulted in something getting crushed, torn or smashed. It seemed that everywhere he went, things went to pieces.

Making matters worse, the dogs loved him and followed him constantly, adding their considerable size and clumsiness to the fray. Thea had kindly but firmly barred Alexander from the library. The very thought of him near all of her hard work sent a tremor through her.

"He needs to channel his energies," Lady Sarah was saying as she dubiously browsed the shelves.

Thea rose. "There are some books on naval matters over here, in English. I know that your son admires his uncle a great deal, perhaps this would pique his interest."

Lady Sarah took the book and flipped through the pages, frowning. "I'm surprised my brother kept these. I wouldn't think he'd want any mementos of the navy. But," she continued without elaborating, "these should do for Alexander. One last resort before I tie him to a chair." Lady Sarah smiled wryly.

There was a giggle, heralding the arrival of young Margaret, leading Captain Birch by the hand and with Alexander in tow. Thea supposed she couldn't ban the boy from the library while his uncle was there, but she set aside the ink pot, just in case.

"Here are my darlings!" Lady Sarah cried, leaning down to straighten Margaret's sash. "How have you been tormenting your poor uncle today?"

Margaret, still holding tight to the Captain's hand, laughed. "We were playing, Mother, not tormenting."

"Tormenting *me*," Alexander complained. "She made us play with dolls!" His disgust was obvious.

"Don't worry yourself," the Captain said, "we'll do something more

masculine tomorrow." He let go Margaret's hand and went to sit behind his desk.

Thea was puzzled. Once again he was without his cane, though she could see the stiffness in his movements and the brackets around his mouth, all clear signs that his knee was paining him. In fact, she realized she hadn't seen him with his cane since his family had arrived.

Alexander was exclaiming over the naval books. He was so excited that some of Thea's skepticism faded; perhaps reading would do him some good.

"Look, Uncle Gideon! Are these like any of your ships?" Alexander brought a book round and placed it on the desk. "I'm going to be an officer, too, when I'm grown. In a few years."

Rather than being pleased with his nephew's severe case of hero worship, Captain Birch frowned. "Where did you get these?"

"Miss Ridley picked them out at my request," Lady Sarah answered.

"Good God, Thea." Captain Birch shut the book and pushed it away. "Couldn't you have found any other topic?"

Thea blushed as Lady Sarah cast an interested glance at her. Only the Captain was oblivious to the fact that he had just called Thea by her first name.

Lady Sarah's response was one second off beat. "You may take your books to your room, Alexander. And Margaret, too." When the children quit the room, she continued, "He only wants to emulate you, Gideon."

"Well, you will have to teach him something else, Sarah." The Captain's tone was tense, and Thea turned back to her worktable, feeling suddenly like an eavesdropper. There was obviously something more to the matter than she was aware of.

They continued, however, either forgetting or unconcerned with her presence. Thea had never heard Captain Birch talk in such a way. "Christ, Sarah, you would never in your right mind permit such a thing!"

"He's nine years old; I hardly think it's something to be concerned about." Lady Sarah's tone was even, careful.

"He'll reach his majority soon enough. Perhaps the *Viscount* should talk to him."

Lady Sarah was beginning to get angry. "Rest assured, *Richard* is a fine father. And if Alexander reaches his majority and does decide on the military, then we will support his decision."

Thea had to look when she heard Captain Birch snort. He was staring at his sister in disbelief, his face red. "Have you lost your mind?"

Lady Sarah set her chin. "It's a perfectly respectable calling – "

"He doesn't need a calling – he'll be a viscount! How could you even think of letting him do something so stupid!"

Why, Thea wondered, was he so opposed to Alexander taking up the same career that he himself had chosen?

"If it were his *choice*, Gideon, Richard and I would accept it. It wouldn't be like – "

Captain Birch cut her off with a wave of the hand and a pointed look at Thea. Lady Sarah frowned. The look she gave her brother told him the conversation was not over. "If you'll excuse me," she said, quitting the room and leaving Thea burning with curiosity.

She looked at the Captain, who scowled at her in response. "Can you assist me?" he asked after a moment.

"Of course."

He rubbed a hand through his hair and exhaled in agitation. "I need my cane."

Thea moved toward the door. "Is it in the hall?"

"Upstairs, in my bedchamber."

She stopped, her hand on the doorknob. "Your bedchamber?" She felt herself pinken. Stupid, but there it was.

"So I said," he answered curtly.

"But your leg is paining you, I can see it. Why haven't you been using it?"

"Shall I go myself?" he snapped.

Thea bristled. "Captain Birch – "

"If you call me Captain Birch one more time, I'm going to reorganize the bloody bookshelves by color. Can you not, for God's sake, call me Gideon? At least when we are alone?"

No, she wanted to say. *Gideon* was how she referred to him in her treacherous thoughts, late at night when she was falling asleep and her imagination broke free of its tether. But one look at him told her it would be better to comply. He might just do good on his threat if she didn't.

"Where is it?"

He stared at her and would not answer. Thea pushed air out of clenched teeth. "Very well. Where is it, Gideon?"

His smile was victorious, his tone suggestive. "All this time and you don't know where my bedchamber is. The third door on the right. The cane is next to my bed."

"Wonderful," Thea replied as she turned. "You could do with a good caning."

Of course, she told herself as she hurried up the stairs, he did not stop to think how awkward it would be for her to be seen going into his bedchamber. Hardly anyone in the household could fail to be aware that the services of one's translator were rarely required in the

bedroom. But she met no one, and was soon in the room, shutting the door quickly behind her.

She saw the cane immediately but did not move to reach it. Instead she stopped and looked, unable to resist this chance to see into his private chambers. To catch a glimpse, perhaps, of the man behind the cane.

The colors were deep, masculine; dark blue bedding and draperies, mahogany wood, deep crimson patterned rugs. Sunlight filled the room from two sets of long windows, through which she could see a green expanse of lawn. It looked lived-in and comfortable, though there were not many ornaments or clutter.

Neither was there anything intensely personal about, nothing that might provide insight into his secret life.

Alone, in his bedchamber... Thea moved, and hurried to collect the cane. As curious as she was, the intimacy of the moment was not lost on her.

It must have only been her imagination, but she thought the scent of him, the earthy aura that was his own, lingered beside the bed. *This is where he sleeps.* Lightly, she ran a hand over his pillow; she could not resist. The silk was smooth and cool beneath her touch, and she dearly wondered what it was that he dreamt of.

Fortune was with her once again, for she was soon back in the library without encountering anyone. Gideon looked up at her as she entered the room and extended his hand, clearly impatient for his cane. Thea held back.

"Your injury is troubling enough to keep this cane at your bedside. Obviously you need it first thing in the morning. It is much worse than you let on even to Agatha, and yet it's been sitting unused." Thea raised her chin in response to his glare, prepared to meet his obstinacy in full measure.

"I don't see that it's any business of yours."

"It's not," she admitted plainly. "I'm merely wondering why you are deliberately causing yourself discomfort, which by the way, is doing nothing for your disposition."

He stared at her. Realizing this was doing no good, he finally relented, looking no less angry. "I do not depend on the cane before my mother and sister."

"Surely they know you were injured?" Thea asked, surprised.

"They do not know the extent of my injury."

"The cane merely assists you – "

"That is my preference." He impatiently extended his hand again, clearly signaling that the conversation was over.

Thea went to him, stopping before his desk. He looked tired, and angry, drawn in a way she had not seen him. "It is not a sign of

weakness to use this cane. Gideon." She ran a finger over the smooth ebony surface and extended it to him, but he did not take it from her.

"This is not, I assure you, some misguided attempt to hide any hint of weakness from my family." He looked up at her and something shifted in his face, the anger replaced by distress. "My mother would worry, which would then lead to fussing, which inevitably leads to advice..." He shrugged and was silent for so long that Thea began to wonder if he was dismissing her.

When he spoke, it was with resignation. "There are few people in this world I love more than my sister. She has been everything to me that my brother has not.

"It is difficult to imagine war, if one has not seen it. The thick of the battle, the chaos... But if Sarah were to see my reliance on this cane, she would know. She would know precisely what the war had cost me, and I cannot... I simply cannot."

His scar was a bright white line against the tight set of his mouth. He exhaled harshly and rubbed a hand over his face. "Perhaps if she knew, she wouldn't encourage Alexander's absurd fantasies."

"You are afraid to see him hurt?"

"Good God, of course I am! War is hell. But the navy is no kind of life, even in peacetime."

"You are speaking with the benefit of hindsight. Alexander sees only the possibilities of accolades and drama," Thea said, thinking of the boy's obvious worship of his uncle.

"Is that what you think?" His lip curled. "Accolades and drama?"

The sudden burst of mockery startled Thea. Before she could respond, he said, "I'm afraid my opinion of your intelligence just plummeted."

"Of course that's not what I think!" she answered hotly. "That is what Alexander sees, for he is too young to have any real knowledge of the obstinate folly of which mankind is capable. He is young enough to idolize you and to believe you incapable of human fault." She let go the cane; it fell onto his desk with a clatter.

"My intelligence is well enough to know that it would never lead me to war, even if I were a man. What did you think would happen when you joined His Majesty's Navy? Did you think you would be excused from the duties of the very career you chose?"

"I didn't choose it!" Thea actually jumped when his hand slapped the desk. A volatile mixture of emotions played across his face; his eyes were a dark stormy blue. "It wasn't my choice," he repeated in a near-whisper.

Thea was puzzled. She recalled Lady Sarah's words: *If it were his choice, Gideon*. "Then whose choice was it?" she asked, frustrated by his testiness.

His face, when he looked up at her, was devoid of all emotion save hurt. "My brother's."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Gideon had delighted in antagonizing his brother. It was no difficult thing; it seemed that his every move had Simeon calling him to the carpet for one of his tiresome lectures. Simeon had infinite ideas as to how Gideon should behave, ideas he expressed at great length and with frequency. Mostly they included Gideon modeling his behavior after his own, which would involve a great deal of self-righteous priggishness and no amusement at all.

Simeon did not take kindly to this opinion.

Even Gideon would admit, in retrospect, that many of his actions were undertaken with very little forethought. He could have done with a bit more responsibility, though it was probably the last thing he would have wanted at the time. He had the money and the looks to ensure an enjoyable life of carefree self-indulgence, and saw no reason to change.

Simeon saw differently. Gideon, in his opinion, had never had to get by on anything other than his looks. He saw Gideon wasting his life on dissolute vices, meandering from one woman to the next. He saw a spoiled pretty boy that would not heed his older brother's advice. He saw no other option.

"And so," Gideon concluded, "without my knowledge or consent, he purchased a commission for me, and had me off to sea within a month."

"Abominable!" Thea exclaimed. She had sat down at some point in his story, and was now perched on the edge of her chair. "There must have been some recourse. Surely they could not have held you to the terms of the commission if it was undertaken without your consent."

"Likely not. But what option was there that would not pronounce my cowardice to the world? So it would have appeared, to renounce my commission. I would have been a laughingstock."

"Certainly no worse than facing the possibility of death?"

Gideon shrugged. "Perhaps, perhaps not. Yet how could I justify it to myself? Why should I have absolution when so many others had none? They were men, just as I was, and they could not back out. No, the thing was done and I had no choice."

"Yes, you did," she said. She bit down on her lip. "And you chose honorably. You could easily have returned to your former life; a more shallow man would have. Will you forgive my comments?"

"They are forgotten." There was a warmth in his chest at her outrage on his behalf, at her puckered brow, her eyes cloudy with emotion. "It was a long time ago," he said, wanting, strangely, to comfort her now.

"I cannot conceive of such a betrayal," she said shakily.

Such a small statement to carry so much weight.

For a moment he could not speak. Instead, he focused on his cane, laying where she had dropped it on the desk. "Thank you, for bringing this."

"It was nothing," she answered. "I... Do they know, your mother and sister, what your brother did?"

Gideon nodded.

"And they...approved?"

"My mother did. She's never gone against Simeon's wishes, and she left him to raise me as he saw fit, after our father died. Sarah could do nothing apart from express her anger in the form of a hasty marriage which Simeon opposed. She could have done better, were it not for the two of us."

He laughed. "The ironic bit is that I hate ships. I always have. Upon my discharge I vowed never to set foot on one again."

She looked at him a moment, and with a nod to the cane, said, "You aren't going to use it at all while they're here, are you? Despite the pain, despite the damage you are likely doing to your knee?"

Gideon shook his head and the corner of Thea's mouth curved. "Notwithstanding your explanations, I am not convinced your motives are entirely free of pride," she said. She lifted the cane and handed it to him. He took it, wrapping his fingers around her hand before she could pull away. How he wanted to kiss her.

He settled instead for a stolen caress, squeezing her hand beneath his, her flesh warm and soft. They were on opposite sides of his desk, and perhaps this distance gave her a feeling of security, for she did not resist. She looked at their fingers and then at him, her eyes large and vibrant green against the milky paleness of her skin.

He was caught – wanting her so much, aching with need for her night after night, and yet fearing that anything more than a touch on the hand would send her flying from him.

He waited for her to move her hand and break contact. Letting go was beyond him.

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Fortunately, his family required nothing more from him that evening than his time, and they spent the hours before bed-time at various pursuits in the drawing room. The smaller children had been sent to their reluctant beds hours earlier, so there was some measure of relaxation between Gideon, his mother, sister and niece.

The pain in Gideon's knee was not unlike a dull nail being driven into the cartilage. Though he'd never experienced that particular occurrence, there was in all likelihood a nail's worth of metal shrapnel

in his knee, so it was probably a fair comparison.

He had managed, however, to find a comfortable enough position before the fire and to cajole his niece, Felice, into a long game of chess that was doing his leg a deal of good.

Felice was frowning down at the chessboard, and Gideon could not resist teasing her. "Do decide soon, Felice – I do have to get some sleep tonight."

"Trying to distract me? Poor tricks indeed, Uncle."

Unaffected by his teasing, she continued to concentrate, leaving Gideon with the opportunity to study her.

She had always been a pretty thing, dainty and blonde and sweet. She had large blue eyes and fine silky hair, and Gideon was sure that she would have no shortage of admirers at her debut the following year. He only hoped his brother would choose well for her, for Felice had a sparkling spirit that needed someone to nurture it.

Felice finally made her move and flashed him a grin. "There's no use in doing a thing if you don't intend on doing it well. And, as you may have noticed, I intend on defeating you."

Gideon laughed. It was one of Felice's most endearing qualities that she took things so seriously. A trait inherited from Simeon, no doubt. Yet she still managed to be a perfectly amusing and warm-hearted girl. It was a wonder, really, that Simeon had ever produced her.

Gideon perused the chessboard in false concentration. Chess was not the point, which was why he had drawn out the game for so long. He enjoyed his niece, and this was one of the rare times when he had her virtually to himself. Though she could be as frivolous as any girl her age, Felice also possessed a very genuine personality that made up for it. It was how he had come to love this child of the brother he disliked.

"Can we place a wager, Uncle Gideon?"

Gideon smiled, intrigued. He saw his mother glance up from her embroidery, frowning slightly. "What type of wager?"

"If I win, you'll have a party," she replied hopefully.

"A party..." he said. "Of what sort?"

"Nothing too formal," Felice answered quickly, leaning forward across the chessboard. "Just a nice to-do to bring some fun into the house. It's been so very quiet."

"That is a wonderful idea, Felice," his mother said. "This house could do with some amusement."

"There aren't enough servants for a party," Gideon said.

"You'll hire some from the village," his mother replied. Apparently she considered the matter decided, for she returned to her embroidery.

Felice was watching him expectantly. "Whom would we invite?" he

asked.

"Any of your friends from the village – " he heard a snort from Sarah " – or anyone you wish, but hopefully some young people, for I would so love to socialize. Not," Felice amended hastily to her family members, "that you aren't the very best company. I only wish to associate with people of my age." She looked at Gideon hopefully.

He pretended to consider the matter, though he knew full well he would grant his niece's request. But he did have to set some ground rules. "A daytime affair only." With no chance whatsoever of dancing.

Felice clapped her hands in glee. "Oh, thank you, Uncle Gideon!" She bounced up from her chair and gave him an exuberant kiss on the cheek. "Oh, such fun!"

Gideon could not help but laugh at her joy. It took so little, at that age, to make one happy. Such a little thing as this party, he knew, would occupy Felice's attentions for the next few days. And the event itself would doubtless provide her with cheerful memories for weeks afterward. He almost envied her.

"Ahem." He cleared his throat to get her attention. "And what shall I claim as my forfeit, if you lose? It was a wager you were proposing, or did you forget?"

Felice looked taken aback, and his mother interjected, "For pity's sake, Gideon, grant the chit her request so we can all get to bed. My back has begun to ache most terribly. You shall have to see to new furnishings..." She rose, and began to collect her things, calling the evening to an end.

Felice gave him an impish smile, for she knew he would give her her way. He was, in her experience, a very indulgent uncle. Gideon merely rolled his eyes in exaggerated helplessness, and she squealed, granting him another kiss.

"Come, Felice," the dowager countess intoned, and they were gone to seek their beds.

"You are a very good uncle," Sarah said, taking Felice's seat near him.

He shrugged. "It wasn't a very great request. And I've nothing against parties, if you recall."

Sarah laughed. "Parties were nigh on a vocation for you. But it was kind of you, nevertheless. It makes Felice feel grown-up."

"Grown-up?" Gideon growled, only partially jesting. The years had trickled away, particularly the last ten, which had passed in war. He had spent the first seven years of her life living in the same home as Felice, at Clybourn House. He remembered what a little chatterbox she'd been, following him around and always talking, talking, talking... And now her debut was fast approaching. It was even conceivable that she could be engaged by this time next year.

"Time waits for no man, or so they say," his sister responded. "The years are advancing."

Gideon nodded, staring at the chess pieces with growing melancholy, until Sarah's next comment brought his head snapping up.

"You should think of having your own children."

"What?" he asked, half-laughing.

"Surely you've considered children. And not," she said, seeing his look, "the prevention thereof."

"Why," he asked acerbically, "are you bringing up children?"

"Only because you're such a wonderful uncle. Alexander wants to be you; Margaret adores you, and even fickle Felice has never wavered in her affections. Therefore, I feel it safe to conclude that you would be a wonderful father to your own children, which, if you do not soon apply yourself to the creation of, you shall be too old to ever consider."

"I am not that old." Gideon stared at his sister, torn between laughter and shouting. "There's really nothing you'll refuse to meddle in, is there?"

Sarah smiled sweetly. "Not where you're concerned, at least not when you're so obviously mismanaging your life."

"Oh-ho! Mismanaging my life! By not having children?"

"Among other things."

Gideon waited, but he knew his sister, and she would not continue until he asked. She was very good at withholding information. "What other things?" he asked, cursing himself as he did so.

Sarah raised a brow in that elegant way all women had, managing with that tiny gesture to convey precisely how inferior she thought him to be. She folded her hands and leaned back in the chair. "Miss Theadosia Ridley."

Gideon actually gaped. How in the world... "I'm afraid I don't know what you mean."

"Ha!" Sarah shouted and then laughed. "I knew it!"

"How much have you had to drink tonight?" He looked around, as though searching for empty bottles and glasses that might prove that she was indeed inebriated.

"Oh, I am completely sober, dear brother, and wise enough to see what is right before me. Miss Ridley," she added, in conspiratorial tones.

"Sarah," Gideon put a hand to his head, as though fatigued by her musings. In reality, he needed a moment to avoid his sister's gaze. "What are you on about?"

"You can't hide anything from me – you never could. I always knew what you were about."

"Not always. Of that I assure you." He shot her a glance, happy to see that this comment, at least, had some effect on her. Sarah might have known of his reputation, and she might think she knew even more now that she was a married woman herself, but in reality, she had no idea of the extent of his carousing.

She nodded, acceding that point. "Miss Ridley is in this house nearly every day and I'm sure I've never seen you do more than glance at her. You make a concentrated effort to avoid her. It's too obvious. And, you called her by her first name. Today, in the library."

"That's your proof?" he scoffed.

Sarah shook her head. "It was her reaction to it. Thea, you said, and everything was right there in her face."

Gideon forgot about standing guard. "What was in her face?"

"Confusion. Alarm. Embarrassment."

Gideon laughed, sure now that Sarah was completely on the wrong track. Yet somehow disappointed.

Sarah was not to be deterred. "Why would the use of her Christian name generate such a response? Because you did it before me, and she was afraid of my reaction. She looked right at me, as though you had spilled a secret. Which you had," Sarah concluded, in very satisfied tones.

A denial sprang to Gideon's lips, and just as quickly evaporated. What would be the point? Sarah had figured out part of the situation; there was no use in denying it. And it wasn't if there were anything to hide. "It isn't what you think. We are not...involved."

Sarah was smiling at him with no satisfaction, he was glad to see. "But she does mean something to you?"

Gideon nodded and acknowledged the truth. "She does," he confessed. Sarah watched him, and he had the feeling she could discern very much by his silence, but he could think of nothing to say. He could only look into the dying fire, amazed at how much Thea had come to mean to him.

Eventually Sarah said, "I must admit to some surprise, even with my suspicions."

"Why is that?" he asked, puzzled.

Sarah paused, apparently choosing her words. "Based on past experience, she does not appear to fit your type."

"My *type*?"

"You weren't generally seen with the shy and quiet ones, were you? Your...women tended to be more on the flamboyant side. To put it politely."

Gideon frowned. "I would hardly call Thea shy and quiet."

"No," Sarah conceded. "Neither would I call her your type."

For some reason, her comments were exceedingly annoying.

"Perhaps my interests have changed over the past decade. Perhaps I've changed."

"Oh, ho!" Sarah laughed. "You have definitely changed."

"What is so funny?" he bit out. Inasmuch as he loved Sarah, there was no one who could irritate him so quickly or so thoroughly.

Sarah gave him a look that indicated just how foolish she found him. She had a familiar mischievous glint in her eye. "You've taken up residence here in the dead middle of nowhere living, as far as I can tell, the life of a monk. It's doubtful that any woman apart from Miss Ridley or that old housekeeper has even set foot in this house. Changed? Oh, dear brother, that is the boldest sort of understatement."

Just because she was right didn't make him more agreeable.

"It's a good change." Her tone lost its teasing edge. "I wouldn't have wanted to see you entertaining the same pursuits at this stage in your life. What kind of a man would you have become otherwise?"

The general attitude in his family was that Gideon needed saving from himself. He had been too debauched, in their opinion, to ever live his life accordingly.

He had despised military life and all of the ensuing bloodshed, but he had achieved some measure of success. The commission had been purchased, but the promotions and the work were his own. He could look back on the past decade and know, at least, that he was competent. He could look back and know that they were wrong.

None of which would ever justify Simeon's betrayal.

All desire for conversation was lost. Sarah's words had dredged up a great deal. Wounds he had thought long healed mixed with thoughts of Thea until he could no longer bear his mangled emotions. So he did not protest when Sarah went up to bed. He continued to sit in his comfortable chair and stare into the fire, wondering what kind of a man he was.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

For a man who used to socialize as much as he did, Gideon had become a veritable hermit. His house, a refuge, was now overrun with people, and he found he did not like it one bit.

Felice was having her party.

"What's happened to you? Has the fish gone off?"

Gideon frowned down at his sister, not in the mood to appreciate her humor. "I think the entire village is here."

Sarah shrugged. "Did you think they wouldn't come if you invited them?"

"I didn't assume they'd overrun my entire house."

"It's the lawn, Gideon. Not a one of them would dream of entering the house, especially the way you're scowling at them. Do stop."

Technically, Sarah was right. It was a lawn party, and had been set up accordingly. White canopies covered white linen-draped tables, and all of the guests – what must be each and every living person in Littleover – were spread out across the clipped green grass. Still, he didn't have to like it.

"You need to make an effort," Sarah was saying. "You promised Felice, after all, and it's not the thing to stand here raining on her parade."

Per his custom, Gideon didn't respond when Sarah was right. He only tried to school his features into less of a scowl and scanned the party for the only person who interested him.

–

The party served to illustrate to Thea, in a manner most unpleasant, exactly how different she was from the family of her employer. Gideon's family had been exceptionally kind to her; who was she, after all, other than an insignificant employee? But their kindness had made her forget the gap between them, and now here it was, yawning as large as an abyss at her feet.

This party, she knew, was nothing in their eyes, only the most basic of niceties laid out for an afternoon's entertainment. And yet it was the grandest event Thea, and likely most of the villagers, had ever attended.

For all its simplicity, everything from the linens to the plates to the food were of a quality Thea had never beheld. Locked away in the library without the barometer of the outside world, Thea had come to feel no different from Lord Birch, or his sister, or his niece. And now, looking down at her "best" gown, the only one she owned that was not noticeably worn and, if it had ever been fashionable, was at least a

decade behind the current mode, Thea saw that she was nothing like Lord Birch and his family. She wasn't even like their poorest relation.

It was more than money, though. Gideon and his family possessed an innate manner that betrayed their class. They had the polish of generations of good breeding and discernment that no amount of money alone could buy. They were, Thea thought looking around the group of Littleoverians, their "betters."

"I'm told you shouldn't scowl at parties. Although," Thea turned to find Lord Birch standing beside her, "you don't appear to be scowling so much as brooding. Either way, I have it on the best of authority that it is not the thing."

Thea couldn't fight a smile. Neither could she fight the surge of warmth at the sight of him – that feeling that started low in her belly and spread upward and outward until she felt positively flushed all over her skin. It was becoming rather commonplace. But then, he was a sight to behold; his tall frame dressed in a simple but well-tailored blue coat and buff breeches outlining the long lines of his strong legs. His eyes were bright and blue and mesmerizing, and Thea would make a complete cake of herself if she did not look away, so she did, staring with great interest at the grass.

"I think you have all of Littleover on your lawn, sir."

She saw his shrug from the corner of her eye. "I seem to be a great object of curiosity. I can flatter myself it is because I am so interesting, or I can slur the villagers by implying they've nothing better to entertain them."

He turned to her. "Haven't even got the energy to deny you're brooding? You are worse off than I thought then. Perhaps a glass of lemonade will set you to rights?" He was teasing her, of course, but she couldn't help smiling at the grass.

"I think a good slice of gateau should do it," she answered.

"Hm. It would mean extreme proximity to my mother. She's planted herself right beside the dessert table, the wily old fox." Thea laughed out loud at that description of his mother. Lady Helen was seated next to the dessert table, along with a large group of Littleover's matriarchs and most determined social climbers, Lydia and her mother among them.

How nice it would be to stroll over there with the Captain, Thea thought, and give Lydia a good dose of envy. And just like that, without pausing to examine her motives or think of any silly consequences, Thea succumbed to the urge. For just this moment, at least, she would allow herself to simply do something because she wanted to, no matter how juvenile.

"Certainly nothing you can't handle, my lord Captain." He moved when she did, walking toward the dessert table, and his mother and

Lydia. "Buck up, for mercy's sake – you *are* a war hero, after all."

Gideon's answering laugh was loud enough to capture the attention of all the ladies as they reached Lady Helen's side. Thea could not fail to notice the glint of interest in more than one eye, particularly in Lydia's as she eyed the Captain, and to a lesser degree in Mrs. Coopersmith's as she observed Thea. Snaring a viscount for Lydia would not be beyond their expectations.

"You're awfully amused," Lady Helen said with such obvious suspicion that Gideon laughed again.

"It's a lovely day, mother. Might I offer you some cake?" He turned to the task before she could respond.

"It is a most lovely day, sir," Mrs. Coopersmith interjected, "and a marvelous party. We were just telling your lady mother the very same thing, and extending our thanks for hosting such a lovely affair."

Gideon handed his mother a plate and then gave one to Thea, causing Lydia to give her a curious look. Thea smiled down into her cake, enjoying her little game, adolescent though it was.

"My niece is actually hosting the party. I merely bankrolled the thing," Gideon said.

"And such a wonderful girl she is, sir!" Lydia exclaimed. "I vow she is one of the most charming and refined girls I have ever chanced to meet. Why, I feel as though she is one of my dearest friends already, though I have known her but a brief time."

There was a momentary silence as Gideon absorbed Lydia's rapturous comments. "I am quite fond of her myself," he said. Thea did not have to glance at him to know that the corner of his mouth was quirked in as it did when he was amused; she could hear it in his voice.

"And your home, sir, is breathtaking," one of the other women added, producing a chorus of agreement.

"It is a surprisingly good house," Lady Helen said, interrupting the unabashed fawning. "Of course, it needs some work here and there, and some decent furnishings – " she shot Gideon an arch look, as if reminding him of his domestic delinquency. "It reminds me of my father's house, where I lived as a girl."

Gideon took Thea's plate the moment she finished her cake, and handed her a glass of lemonade. Lydia took it all in. Thea watched her over the brim of the glass as she took a sip, letting the sweet, cool liquid trickle down her throat. She could see the moment when mean-spiritedness won out over decorum in Lydia's eyes.

"It must be amazing to you, Theadosia, to be working in such surroundings after your background. I cannot even imagine the humble dwellings they must have had where you came from."

Thea felt herself flush. Denigrating Thea's background had ever

been a favorite pastime of Lydia's. From the day that she had arrived in Littleover, Lydia had found ways to point out the strangeness, the inferiority of her life in Greece, as evidenced by the brownness of her skin and irregularity of her accent.

Lady Helen spared her from responding by asking, "Where in the world are you from, Theadosia?"

Everyone was looking at her now, some with polite curiosity, a few with barely veiled ridicule. It had ever been thus; the very oddity of her background seemed to offend certain people from the onset, as though she'd had some kind of insolent nerve in being born in a foreign country.

"Greece, ma'am," Thea replied with a soft clearing of her throat.

Lady Helen waved a hand at her. "Of course I know that, dear. Surely you're parents weren't born there as well?"

"No, of course not. My father was from London, and my mother was from Yorkshire."

"Yorkshire!" Lady Helen exclaimed. "As am I. What did you say your mother's name was?"

"May Warburton, ma'am. And then Ridley, of course."

Lady Helen frowned for a moment, working over something in her mind and then looked at Thea with pleasant surprise. "May Warburton! Not Baron Warburton's daughter?"

Thea nodded slowly, shocked. Her grandfather had indeed been a Baron, though she had never met him. Marriage to Victor Ridley had not been seen as advantageous by her family, and her mother had become detached from her family long ago.

Lady Helen clapped her hands in delight. "I knew your mother, girl. Very well indeed. She was a bit younger than me, but she had her debut with my sister Millicent."

Thea was speechless. In all the years she had lived in England, Thea had never met anyone that had known either of her parents. That this woman had known her mother....

"And now that I know it," she scanned Thea's face, "I can see you've the look of her about you; she was quite lovely as well."

"Yes," Thea said. It was the only word that came to mind amidst the jumble of her thoughts.

"I recall it now," Lady Helen was saying. "Your parents were considered very romantic in some circles, running off the way they did. I shall have to write to Millicent – she and your mother were friends back then, she will want to know of May's daughter, I am sure."

Hearing her mother's name made Thea suddenly and instantaneously long for her in a manner she thought she'd outgrown. Lady Helen's words dredged up so much emotion and grief and

memory that Thea could not speak. Frozen to the spot, she felt exposed and foolish for her immature thoughts of a few moments ago. The lemonade tasted sour and the cake sat in her belly like a lump.

Lady Helen was smiling at her expectantly, and the rest of the group was eyeing her in varying degrees of astonishment; none of them had certainly ever dreamed that the odd Ridley family that had come to live among them might have some social connection. Lydia's face mirrored her mother's – a mottled red conveying anger and design, wondering how on earth they could manipulate the situation to their advantage.

There was nothing Thea could say.

Though she was immobilized, some emotion must have shown on her face, for Gideon chose that very moment to overturn an entire cake plate. In the ensuing distraction of rushing servants and exclamations mourning the lost gateau, he was able to slip his hand inside the curve of her elbow and guide her away from his mother, and from the other ladies and the conjured ghost of a young May Warburton.

He led her around the side of the house, away from prying eyes and toward the little garden at the side of the library. Once there he stopped, and reached into his coat pocket. He extracted a handkerchief, and then a flask. She accepted the first and frowned at the second.

"Brandy."

"Since when do you carry brandy on your person?" she asked.

"Since always. It helps with the pain."

"I don't think brandy is a wise remedy."

"Just drink it," he snapped, thrusting the flask at her.

She did. The brandy tasted good, and she liked the way it burned down her throat. She took another small sip, and handed the flask back to him.

"Was it the mention of your mother?"

Thea nodded, feeling utterly foolish that one unexpected word about her mother had caused her to seize up. She must have looked like a fish out there, pasty and gasping for breath. "It...it took me by surprise, to hear her mentioned." She forced a little laugh. "I never would have expected your mother to know her."

"You miss her very much."

Once again Thea nodded, mute. The sounds of the party – laughter, the clinking of silver on plate – came as if from a great distance.

"My father died when I was too young to know or miss him. But I always wondered what sort of man he was, if he would have found me a disappointment."

"I'm sure he would have loved you. My parents adored me," her

voice broke a bit.

Gideon's eyes were scanning her face in open concern. He stood so close to her, his broad shoulders blocking the view behind him. They were strong, able shoulders, capable of carrying a great many burdens. Thea was suddenly overcome with the urge to go to him and lean her head against his chest. The rhythm of his heartbeat would soothe her, and his strong arms would support her. It would be warm and safe and once – just once – she would like someone to help her with the weight of *her* burdens.

She took a step back from him, and made a small sound of anguish.

"Thea," he said as though reading her thoughts, and reached out. His fingertips moved over the line of her brow in a gentle, soothing manner. He cupped her cheek, his fingers and palm warm against her face. Thea felt that at any moment she was sure to burst into tears, overcome with all the longing within her: Longing for a mother, for a father, for a life not fraught with constant worry for her own survival; and the deepest, most shattering longing for this man before her.

She stepped back again, breaking contact. "I must go." She turned away before she could change her mind. Before she could succumb to the warmth of blue eyes and the hypnotic point of an intriguing little scar, she went into the house. She passed through the library, light and sunny at this time of day, into the foyer, headed for the front door where she could leave without passing the other guests.

Some sixth sense told her to look up, even as she kept walking toward the door. Her feet continued for a step or two of their own accord, until her mind registered precisely what she was seeing and her step paused, a numbness tying them to the floor as though weighted.

From the foyer was the staircase that led high onto the second story. Little Margaret sat midway up the stairs, her eyes turned upward to the landing that jutted over the foyer. Even between the intricate banisters Thea could see the look of fear on her face.

For there, at the top of the landing and outside the banisters, hanging onto the rail with only a tentative grip was little Alexander, who looked at any moment as if he would slip and fall and crack his head open upon the hard marble floor more than a dozen feet below.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Gid...Gid..." Thea was having a hard time modulating her voice past the knot of fear in her chest. Any alarm, she knew, could startle Alexander and send him plunging from his perch. He was staring down at her in stark terror and Thea could not look away, could not turn to summon Gideon to his rescue.

She heard his footsteps then, heard him say her name before he realized she was staring at something. Then a pause in the moment it took for his gaze to follow hers. Then Gideon was rushing past her, moving to position himself under Alexander whose last sweaty grip on the banister slipped at the sight of his uncle racing toward him.

Alexander was falling and beyond that Margaret was crying out, frozen to her spot on the stairs. Alexander was falling so quickly and so slowly at once, but Gideon was there, breaking his fall before the marble floor could. He caught Alexander mid-stride, grabbing the boy around the waist as his legs twisted awkwardly beneath him. They fell that way, with a loud grunt, Alexander landing atop his uncle.

Thea ran to them. There was no blood and they were both conscious, though Gideon was gasping to regain his breath. Thea grabbed Alexander, running her hands over his arms and legs to ascertain if any bones were broken. He seemed intact, in as far as she could see, but burst into tears. Margaret began wailing from her spot on the stairs, which brought a servant running to investigate the commotion.

"Fetch a doctor!" Thea ordered. "And Lady Sarah!"

She turned her attention to Gideon, who was not even trying to rise. The thumping in her chest diminished somewhat when she saw that he appeared largely unhurt, but she needed no examination to know that he had injured his knee. Running or falling alone would aggravate his war wound – the way he had twisted under the force of Alexander's weight had certainly done it painful and lasting harm.

She took his hand and looked down at him. The eyes that looked back at her with glazed with shock and pain and she squeezed his hand, saying, "The doctor is coming. You mustn't move."

"Alexander..."

"He's here. I think he is unhurt. You bore the brunt of the fall."

"I do not want my sister to see me this way. Sarah cannot..." He tried to sit up. "Help me."

"For God's sake!" Thea exclaimed, incredulous that this was his concern at the moment. "You will make it worse!"

Lines of pain etched his face as he managed to sit, his mouth a tight line, his skin ashen. "The damage is done."

He was probably right.

Thea looked around, noticing a cushioned bench near the door. She helped Gideon rise – no mean feat, as he was resting nearly all of his considerable weight on her – and eased him to it. He sat down on the bench just as Sarah burst through the door.

"What is it? The servant said – Alexander!" Intuitively she ran to her son, who was still sitting on the floor where Thea had put him. The sight of his mother in all her maternal ferocity brought on a fresh onslaught of tears, which brought a weeping Margaret rushing down from the stairs and into her mother's arms. All in all, it was chaos.

Only Thea was paying attention to Gideon, who was sweating and pale, and breathing in harsh, shallow gulps. She stayed right beside him, letting his shoulder rest against her arm, fearful that he was about to faint.

"What happened?" Lady Sarah cried, frantically looking from her wailing children to Gideon. She kept running her hands over Alexander's head and limbs, searching for injury, while trying to soothe Margaret at the same time.

There was a second's pause until Thea realized that Gideon was unable to answer, so she spoke. "Your brother just saved your son from breaking his neck." Fear for Gideon's injury was replacing her shock, making her more than a little angry on his behalf. "Alexander was standing at the top of the landing, on the outer edge of the banister, in what has to be the stupidest stunt I've ever seen in my life!"

"You forget yourself, Miss Ridley!" Lady Sarah gasped. Alexander peeked out at her from under his mother's arm, looking very afraid. But Thea had no sympathy for him now that she could see he was unharmed.

"Indeed, I do not. Had not his uncle intervened at the moment he did, Alexander would have fallen and suffered some very nasty injuries at best. As it is, Gideon – " Gideon pressed against her arm, cutting her off. Even now, he was hiding his injury from his sister and stupid as that was, Thea would abide by his wishes and aid him. She could not suppress an incensed snort.

Lady Sarah looked from Gideon to Thea, obviously thrown. "Gideon?"

"He had the wind knocked out of him, breaking Alexander's fall," Thea said quickly. "The doctor has been called," she added, knowing how stunned and worried Lady Sarah must be, and to distract her from Gideon's condition.

Then the servants were there, helping Lady Sarah get the children upstairs and mercifully putting an end to further talk.

Much later, after the doctor had come and gone, Thea snuck up the staircase to Gideon's bedroom. After the foyer had cleared out she had summoned the coachman, Benjamin, to help Gideon to his bed. Benjamin had virtually carried him up the stairs while Thea had stayed below, chewing her lip in agitation, longing to accompany him.

Instead, she had waited in the library, peeping through the door until she saw Dr. Jonas leaving, whereupon she intercepted him and told him under the strictest confidentiality that he had another patient in worse straits than Alexander. He climbed back up the stairs and was with Gideon for a long time.

Alexander, apparently, was fine, suffering from no injuries other than, Thea hoped, a bruised backside for his foolishness. She was fond of the boy, but all of her concern now was for Gideon.

So she waited until the house quieted and she was fairly certain everyone had retired to someplace or other where they weren't apt to witness her climbing the stairs to her employer's bedroom. And if they did see her, she didn't care; for there was no possible way she could go home without ascertaining his condition.

She opened his door slowly, slipping in quickly when she was sure he was alone. It was dark in his bedchamber; a lone candle burning on a table near the bed sent murky shadows across the floor and walls. She approached him softly, not wanting to wake him if he were asleep.

He was lying on his back with his eyes closed, clad in a white nightshirt and covered from the waist down. There was a lump under the bedcovers, where Thea assumed his leg was propped up. His breathing was shallow and a frown marked the area between his brows. The thin scar glowed bright where his lips were pressed together, and it upset Thea to know that he was in pain even in his sleep.

She stood there looking at him, knowing she should leave but unable to do so. He was so vulnerable, so alone in this house full of his people who had no idea that anything was even wrong with him. In many ways he, a man with a considerable amount of family, had no more support than she, an orphan, did.

The urge to reach out to him, to comfort him in some small way was overpowering, so she extended a hand to brush the hair from his forehead. His hair was silky, his skin warm but not hot beneath her fingers. She let her hand linger there a moment, such a small gesture, but one she was incapable of making in his waking moments.

Gideon stirred beneath her touch and turned his head, opening his eyes. The lids were heavy and he stared at her with no apparent recognition.

"How are you?" she asked, quietly, gently.

He frowned in response and licked his lips. "Thirsty."

Thea looked and found a pitcher of water, and hurriedly brought the cup to him, holding it to his lips. "What did the doctor say?"

"Said it was bad. Gave me laudanum."

That explained his dazed state and the unfocused direction of his stare. It was a wonder he was even awake. Thea knew what the drug did; her mother had been given large doses of laudanum in her final days and had spent her last moments asleep, unaware of her husband and daughter at her side.

"Sleep will help you," she said, wanting to say something. "Agatha might have something. Do you have any of the unguent she sent you?"

He nodded slowly. "In the table there."

She found it and returned, holding the jar in her hand hesitantly, sensitive to the possibility that he might not welcome her help. But there was no one else, and she resolved to do what she could whether he liked it or not.

He answered her questioning look with a nod of permission. Thea uncapped the unguent and gently peeled back the bedcovers.

It was so quiet in the room. Indeed, the entire house seemed to have fallen under a spell of unusual silence, so Thea did her best to mute the gasp that tore from her throat as she turned back the blankets and saw his knee.

The doctor was right – it was very bad.

A thick, puckered scar marked the side of his kneecap. It was white, but his knee was red and grotesquely swollen. Around the large scar were countless smaller scars, marks and gashes showing the full scope of his wound. She didn't know how much of the swelling was due to today's incident and how much from his initial injury; she only knew he was lucky to have use of the leg at all, and then wondered how much damage to his mobility had been done by Alexander's foolish stunt.

Thea glanced at him through her lashes. He was watching her as from a distance, waiting for a reaction. And though she wanted to weep for all he had endured, she held the tears back for his sake. It would not do to break down in front of him.

She merely gave him a small, reassuring smile, and slipped her fingers into the cool, silky contents of the jar. She rubbed the unguent between her palms, warming it and then began to spread it on his knee.

Thea had no idea what Agatha had mixed into its contents, but the scent alone was comforting, flowery and medicinal at once. His skin was warm, the scar rough-textured and unyielding and she worked slowly, keeping her touch light. The gentle massage might help the

damaged cartilage.

He was so still that she assumed he'd fallen asleep again, but after a long time when she looked up, he was staring down at her through half-lidded eyes. The lone candle sent odd shadows over his face, but she could discern his discomfort. There was something else there as well, a hint of defiance in his gaze.

Thea cleared her throat softly in reflexive discomfort. She made a show of re-capping the unguent and placing it on the bedside table. There was so much she wanted to say to him, but knew that any expression of sympathy for his injuries was not likely to be taken well.

She settled instead for a neutral tone as she asked, "How did it happen?"

He stared down at her for a moment until she began to wonder if he would answer. He shifted the tiniest bit and groaned softly as even that small motion jarred his leg. Then he spoke, his voice gravelly and low. "It was a minor skirmish. No significant battle or victory or anything so mawkish, just a French ship in the wrong place at the wrong time, trying to outrun us. Which it did. But not without landing one solid blow which happened to strike not five feet from where I was standing.

"I was lucky actually," he laughed darkly. "Any closer and I would have suffered the full brunt of the explosion. As it was I was shielded a bit by a crate that sent approximately five hundred pieces of shrapnel into my leg instead. So I am a merely crippled and not maimed or dead.

"Lucky," he scoffed and fell silent.

Thea looked at him but his gaze had turned away.

"What a bastard I am," he continued silently, "to complain about this-this nuisance, though it causes me a great deal of pain – when other men are missing arms and legs or ended up dead. I should be grateful."

"And other men are living their lives untouched, never having endured what you did," Thea said softly. "You cannot discount your loss simply because others have lost more. You live with a painful, chronic injury; the fact of that is not lessened because others lost their lives. It is what it is, and allow yourself the same concessions you would another man."

That silenced him.

She looked at his hand resting on the blanket, the broad back of it, the long, blunt fingers, remembering the way he had caressed her earlier. She lifted his hand into both of hers, and gently traced her fingertips over it. When she looked up, he was staring at her, wide-eyed and more alert than he'd been since she'd entered his room.

Thea leaned forward as she spoke. "You are one man, nothing

more. Why do you expect so much more of yourself? Your horrors are not inconsequential because you survived them."

His eyes were a dark blue in his pale face, the scar on his lip white with tension. Thea brought up his hand and kissed the back of it. She pressed it to her cheek, lacing her fingers through his.

"If you had died then you wouldn't have come to Littleover, and I wouldn't have come to work for you and I would be in very dire straits indeed. So you see you have saved my life in a roundabout fashion."

"So you are grateful?"

Thea nodded. "Of course."

His hand tensed in hers. "And what else do you feel for me besides gratitude, Thea?" he asked gruffly. "Because I think I love you."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Thea's heart swelled into her throat, ostensibly applying so much pressure to the upper portion of her head that it forced her jaw to hang open and her face to flood in hot color. The pressure was so great that she felt it behind her eyes like a tense, prickling movement.

Gideon was watching her, unfazed.

She stared at him for a moment, and then looked away with a scoff, finally able to shut her mouth.

"That laudanum is playing a pretty trick on your thoughts. I wonder what you said to the doctor?" She laughed, shaking her head as she released his hand and replaced the blankets over his leg. She faked some concentration on the soft gray wool, allowing herself another moment to regain her senses.

That he should say such a thing, even under the influence of laudanum, was enough to set her off-balance and she was mortified that he'd been able to read anything in her face to betray the moment when she'd actually believed him. A flash of belief, less than a second, but nevertheless there. How ridiculous of her.

"Laudanum has nothing to do with it," he muttered darkly.

She had to laugh; it was the only way she knew to diffuse the situation.

"Do not laugh at me!" he interrupted, and before she knew what he was about, he leaned forward and grasped both her arms. Though hurting and drugged, he retained a great deal of strength for he was easily able to pull her across him and hold her there.

He looked at her; his eyes familiar yet odd, made murky by the effects of the drug. The suddenly he pressed his mouth to hers and she did not think.

There was the stunning taste of him, inexplicable and arousing, thrilling through her in a charge of heat and need. There was his scent, the feel of him beneath her, the movements of his chest as he held her and breathed against her lips.

There was the awakening of a great and boundless desire that burst in Thea's belly and surged through every part of her, even into her lips where it most surely passed into Gideon, for he put his hand to the back of her neck and urged her closer with a muffled grunt.

–

It was a wondrous thing that love could be entwined so deeply with such white hot lust. So convenient. So right. So frigging good.

Gideon had Thea in his arms, in his bed technically, warm and sweet and willing, and he thought that his dreams had finally come

true.

He had never been in love before. Never once, with all the women he had known – *known*, in the very biblical sense of the word – had he ever felt anything remotely like what he felt for this matchless creature in his arms. It was such an encompassing, roiling jumble of need, protectiveness, desire, hope, yearning, fondness... He didn't know where it ended, only that he needed more.

More.

He held her tightly, slipping his free hand down along her back to the plump curve of her derriere. He grasped and pulled her firmly against him, showing her in no uncertain terms that he wanted her. He kissed her and held her and ached with a bottomless need.

And then she pulled away.

She did so abruptly, roughly – it must have been the only way she could break his grasp on her. She jerked back and stood up, moved away from the bed and out of his reach. Gideon looked at her, looking so disheveled and desired, her hair mussed, the front of her gown askew. She was breathing heavily.

She pressed the back of her hand to her mouth and turned away, moving in tight little circles, almost as though dancing. Gideon only watched, waiting to see what she would do or say.

He closed his eyes and sank back against the pillows with a sigh, knowing she would never say anything he wanted to hear.

"I trust you don't think it's the drug speaking now," he said after a while, after he could trust himself not to shout. He was irrationally annoyed with the situation – with himself, with her. Everything would be so much better if she'd simply...give in.

"What else could I possibly think?" she answered sarcastically. "That a handsome, wealthy war hero in the prime of his life, one who has had his pick of society women, is suddenly in love with an unfashionable country bluestocking? Yes!" she added, throwing up her hands. "That would make the veriest sense!"

"You find me handsome?"

She stared at him in exasperation. "As you very well know you are."

Gideon did not have a reply to this. In truth, he was beginning to feel a bit sick, likely an aftereffect of his agitation in the wake of the laudanum. The back of his throat felt thick with nausea and his mouth was watering profusely.

"I wonder if you could bring me some water, Miss Ridley."

She took a look at his face and moved quickly. She did not bring him water, but a basin, and just in time. She held it impassively before him as he humiliatingly heaved up the contents of his stomach.

There was the smell of blood.

There was the soul-sickening sound of incoming artillery.

There were the nameless, faceless dead at the receiving end of their own canon fire, shots volleyed out with precision or inaccuracy, depending on the level of battle-induced pandemonium.

There was the choking, gurgling sound a man made as he died at your feet. The helplessness with which you watched him die, could only watch him die as you continued fighting for your own life.

There were those who weren't meant to die, but nevertheless did.

There was the fear. Always, there was the fear.

But mostly, there was the smell of blood.

–

When he woke, she was sitting beside his bed, looking tired. A worried little frown creased the space between her brows as she looked into space, chewing her lip. He knew instinctively that the hour was too far gone for her to still be in his chamber.

Sensing his gaze, Thea turned, her look morphing into one of concern and relief.

"Thank heavens! Are you alright? You were moaning and turning so that I thought a fever had come upon you."

"What are you still doing here?" he asked, evading her question, not willing to go into explanations of his dreams.

"I could scarcely leave you," she replied. "You might have been sick in your sleep and choked."

How enchanting.

"The laudanum. I have never dealt well with opiates."

"I should say not," she said, and rose to bring him a drink of water. She held the cup to his lips as the cool liquid soothed his dry, irritated throat. He drank slowly and deeply, anxious to avoid her gaze.

God only knew what she thought of him, bedridden and ill, likely stinking of objectionable substances. It was hardly the image he wanted to present.

"Better," he said, leaning back. Despite the humiliation of her seeing him this way, there was something undeniably touching about the fact that she'd cared for him. She'd come up to his room and stayed because she thought he needed her. Which of course he did.

"Who is Bluebell?" she asked, resuming her seat next to the bed.

"B-Bluebell? Where did you hear that name?" he asked, astonished.

"You were saying it in your sleep. It must be important to you."

He shrugged. "Bluebell was the name of my ship."

"Oh."

It had been quite an eventful day: Injury, vomit, talking in his sleep... Thea could not have any illusions left about him now, he thought wistfully. Still, he had no intention of illuminating her on the nature of his nightmares. He had some shred of pride yet.

"What time is it?" he asked, trying once again to distract her. This seemed to do the trick, for she jumped up and gave him a shocked look.

"I've no idea! Why, it must be after midnight! I must get home!"

"Now? How do you propose to do so?"

She gave him a blank look. "I will walk."

"You will do no such thing. Even I am not so much a rogue to let you wander the countryside unescorted in the middle of the night."

The bit of comfort he found in her abashed look at hearing the term 'rogue' evaporated in the glint of mutiny in her eye.

"I must go – Agatha will be worried sick."

"I'm sure Agatha was wise enough to realize you were likely detained, and has long since sought her bed. Benjamin can take her a note in the morning."

One brow raised in his direction.

"Unless you would like to go and rouse him from his slumber so that he might drive you home."

"I am perfectly capable of walking – "

"I know, I know," he interrupted, stopping her with a gesture. "You are able, independent, and wise, perfectly capable of walking, and perhaps even flying home, but even you must see the folly of walking several miles alone in the dark. You could just as easily break your leg as be attacked by some wild beast."

"A wild beast? In Littleover?" she scoffed.

"Not all beasts are animals – some resemble humans."

That gave her pause. She was still standing, angled toward the door, but he could see her chewing her lip, trying to decide the best course of action.

"Certainly you've nothing to fear from a bedridden man on sleeping draughts?"

Thea gave him a long level look, telling him such was not the case. "Humph," she said after a minute, and settled back in the chair beside his bed. "I might as well stay; you'll likely do something terrifically heroic if I go, leaving yourself in a mangled pile by the door until I get back." She concentrated on arranging her skirts and making herself comfortable, avoiding his face altogether.

"You aren't implying I'm a hero?" he laughed.

"Are you denying it?" she shot back.

He shrugged. "I'm called one."

"I must alert the King. He will want the title back, I'm sure, if it

was given under false pretenses. Likely it was all a clerical error to begin with, and you are unjustly reaping the benefits of another man's bravery."

Gideon looked at her, taken aback by her sarcasm.

"It goes against everything I know of you, the notion that-that you *wouldn't* be heroic," she explained. "And I very much doubt it's false modesty, or any such rot."

"Somehow I'm not sure if I should be flattered or offended. Thank you?" he said, earning himself a small smile.

"You shouldn't downplay your actions." She blinked and looked away. "Don't imagine your deeds are less worthy because they are yours, when your bravery is very evident."

Gideon had an odd tightness in his throat. For so long he'd been the miscreant, the disappointment. Even now, after years of living away from Simeon, he could not seem to see himself otherwise. Simeon's view of him, though he'd tried everything in his power to destroy it, had become his own view of himself.

Simeon, his brother; the only father figure he'd ever had. And now Thea sat here, calmly believing in him, considering him valuable and good.

He did not think he loved her. He knew it with a certainty that bore from his bones into his blood and straight into his heart, where it pierced with an ache and a sweetness that he thought would be the undoing of him.

He cleared his throat and looked away, unwilling to let her guess at the forces moving within him.

"How is your leg?" she asked. "I could apply some more unguent, if you think it would help."

At his nod, she did just that, and between the pain in his knee and the stimulation of her touch, he relaxed as best he could.

They were silent for a long time; she concentrating on her task, he lost in thought. The room was pleasantly warm, a hint of fresh air coming in through the one open window. There were no sounds coming from the rest of the house, all the occupants long since having settled for the night. It was the kind of quiet that generally brought great unease to Gideon; tonight it brought peace.

He liked the smell of the unguent, especially liked the gentle and careful way Thea's fingers moved over his knee.

Her hair was coming undone from its tight coil. It was looser than he'd seen it, with bits and pieces poking out here and there, and one long thick curl escaped from the back.

His body responded; even under the bedclothes it was obvious that he was hard. Naturally, Thea chose that moment to glance in the vicinity of his cock.

The unguent dropped from her hands as she bolted from her chair and moved away from the bed, utterly and thoroughly shocked. She was still staring at it, aghast. Gideon would have laughed if he wasn't afraid she'd leave.

Her gaze went to his, and she shook her head.

"I did not proposition you," he said, testy at the unspoken accusation.

"You may as well have, sir," she replied primly.

Gideon sighed. "Miss Ridley – Thea. You are a beautiful woman– "

"You should not say such things!"

"Why the devil not? It's true. You are beautiful – stunning actually. Warm and soft and curved in all the right places – "

"Stop!" She was very distressed.

Now he was very cross. "I won't touch you, if that's what concerns you, but I will be damned if I shall not speak my mind in my own house. It is a hard fact that I find you enticing. I should like to kiss your lips, those plump pink lips. I should like to touch every part of your body, all the hot, secret places most. I want to lie with you, here, in this bed or anywhere you'd have me, and then when I'm done, I would like to do it again."

Now she looked as though she might faint away. A flush had overtaken every bit of exposed skin, from her cheeks to the collar of her gown. Likely all of her normally creamy skin was now glowing pink.

Gideon was extraordinarily hard.

Thea, apparently, was at a loss for words. She only stared at him, shaking her head, whether in disbelief or denial he did not know. She was well out of reach but frozen in place, coming no closer but not moving away.

He willed her to come to him. Silently he urged her to approach, to come just within reach so that he might make his dreams reality. All those nights that she had occupied his dreams, naked against him...

He realized he had never, since the beginning of his sexual life at the tender age of sixteen, waited so long for one woman. They had come to him, willingly, and if not, he moved on without a second thought.

A revelation, and he was not sure how he felt about it.

"Go away, Miss Ridley," he growled. "I am finding your presence over-taxing. It will be daylight very shortly – I think you can sleep in the library until then."

Thea was glad her back was to him as she crossed the room; she did not want him to see her trembling.

Trembling with mortification at the things he'd said to her. Yes, it had to be mortification, for how could she allow herself to feel pleasure at his words? How could she dare allow herself to respond with desire and need at such...such audacity and impropriety?

As she reached the door, she pushed aside all of her pleasure, desire and need, and concentrated on drumming up some mortification, which was inconveniently in rather short supply. She did not turn at the door or in any way give any indication of the turmoil of her emotions. She only opened it, and exited the room.

And nearly collided with Lady Sarah, who was standing in the corridor in her nightclothes.

Thea heard the door shut with a soft click behind her.

Lady Sarah's face was completely round in shock. Her eyes were round, nearly bursting from their sockets, and her mouth gaped open in a nearly perfect circle.

Thea, though she was possibly the more shocked of the two, for she had quite forgotten about the other inhabitants of the house, was afraid she merely looked guilty. Certainly, despite the apparent indecency of the situation, she'd done nothing wrong, except in her thoughts.

"Miss Ridley." Lady Sarah's voice was steel. "How unexpected."

Thea twisted her lip in response. What was there to say?

"In the drawing room, if you please. Now."

Lady Sarah turned on her heel and led the way to the drawing room. Thea had no choice but to follow, her head swimming with explanations and excuses, lies and truths, her heart thudding with dread and undeserved shame. Thea focused on the glare of the single candle Lady Sarah carried, a tiny source of light in the incredibly gloomy and long corridor.

Finally they reached the drawing room. Lady Sarah lit a brace of candles; obviously she wanted full illumination on the night's events.

Lady Sarah had always been friendly to Thea, making an effort to include her for no other reason than what was apparently inherent kindness.

There was no hint of that now as she turned and looked at her. There was ice in her eyes, and a heretofore unseen air of authority. Her eyes raked Thea in obvious disdain, taking in her disheveled appearance.

"You will explain yourself."

Thea, though she knew she appeared guilty and could not actually fault the Viscountess for her presumptions, nevertheless bristled at being addressed in such a manner. She was also still struggling with a reasonable explanation, since telling the truth would reveal her unreasonable employer's secret.

"I thought you a woman of character and decency!" Lady Sarah snapped in the silence. "This is how you repay our treatment of you. Likely I am a fool for being so shocked!"

"Lady Sarah, there is a...a good reason, if you will just allow – "

"Save your excuses." Lady Sarah's mouth was tight with anger. "You will remove yourself at once from the premises, and do not consider returning. Your employment here is terminated."

Thea gasped in shock at the unexpected command. Some part of her, however, rallied in justifiable self-righteousness. "With all due respect, Lord Birch is my employer." This woman, sister or not, could not take her position from her.

"My brother," Lady Sarah bit out, "though he may often give evidence to the contrary, knows what is and is not proper for people of a certain class. I mistook you for more than you were, Miss Ridley. I treated you as an equal, and I see you are no more than a common strumpet, using my brother for your own advantage."

She took a deep breath, and went on. "What he does on his own is of little concern to me, and certainly you are not the first or last tart to worm her way into his bed. But while under the same roof as my children, I will decide what is and is not acceptable. Now you will see yourself out, or I will summon the servants to do it."

They would, too. Lady Sarah and her entourage had brought many of their own servants to supplement Gideon's paltry staff.

Oh, but it was unfair. And right at this moment, Theadosia Rose Ridley had had enough of unfair. This time, she would level the playing field and if she had to go out, she would do it fighting.

"Contrary to all evidence," she bit out, "I have not 'wormed' my way into your brother's bed." All in all it had been a very emotional day and she finally snapped. "If you would like to know the dirty, common truth of it, I have been in his chamber tending to his injury. The injury he compounded saving the neck of your foolish son, but which he initially received while fighting Napoleon. Shrapnel, in the knee, serious enough to warrant the daily and constant use of a cane, for it pains him so badly."

Anger on Gideon's behalf as well as her own overrode the momentary remorse at having revealed his secret. "The use of which cane he has hidden from you, his family, for he cannot bear to have you pity him or think less of him. And so he must hide today's injury from all of you as well and there is no one that knows it but me and

no one to tend him but me, nothing more than a common tart." Thea stopped, chest heaving.

If possible, Lady Sarah looked even more stunned than when Thea first encountered her in the corridor outside Gideon's bedroom. The roundness of shock was back, but she was also pale with concern.

"Injured?" she muttered. "But I must go to him! I must see how he does!"

"You cannot!" Thea shouted and then took a breath to calm herself. She was already moving to the door. "He does not want you to know – you cannot tell him I've told you."

Lady Sarah stopped, the desire to go to her brother clearly battling with Thea's injunction.

"It will only make it worse, don't you see," Thea implored. "He will feel pitied and exposed." And betrayed by me, she silently added. "There is nothing you can do. The doctor gave him laudanum and I applied an unguent..." Too late she realized how intimate that sounded.

"Laudanum!" Lady Sarah gasped. She was obviously very concerned for her brother and Thea could not suppress a burst of sympathy. "But...why would he hide..." Lady Sarah sat down with an undignified plop. Thea realized it had been an emotional day for her as well when she put a shaky hand to her forehead.

"Gideon has been using a cane? But...but I've never seen it. Surely I would have noticed if it were that bad."

"With all due respect, my lady, there is no 'if.' It is a very painful injury, and he twisted it quite badly today. He took all of Alexander's weight as he fell from the banister."

Lady Sarah blanched. "He is not maimed?" she asked fearfully.

Thea shook her head. "No, but no doubt this will compound the damage."

"Good Lord."

Thea was suddenly exhausted. She wanted nothing more than to lie down and sleep, and put this long strange day behind her.

"Why did you leave him?" Lady Sarah asked shortly. "Shouldn't someone be with him?"

"I...well...thought it best to go and sleep in the library. He is resting now." That was likely a lie, given the state she'd left him in.

Lady Sarah gave her a shrewd look. "He trusts you," she said. "More than he does his own family."

Thea faltered. "He has no reason for pretense with me, since I am not as close to him as you are."

This earned her a dry laugh. "I very sincerely doubt even you believe that, Miss Ridley. You are at present the closest thing to him in the world."

–

Six days later Thea stood in the library as Gideon made his goodbyes to his family. They had decided to curtail their planned stay, ostensibly because Lady Sarah wished to take her son home, but more likely it was because of what Thea had told her about her brother. Lady Sarah, to Thea's knowledge, had kept her confidence. If she had mentioned anything to her mother, Thea was unaware.

Thea was secretly glad they were leaving. Lady Sarah had undergone a distinct change of attitude toward Thea since the night of their awkward encounter. She hadn't snubbed her or been openly rude; she had, instead, become markedly cool in her limited dealings with Thea.

She supposed the woman resented her. That brother and sister were very close was obvious, and it must have come as a difficult blow to learn that her brother had omitted her from his confidence, let alone that he had chosen Thea as confidant over her.

Furthermore, Thea had lived uneasily, wondering daily if Lady Sarah would tell Gideon that she had learned of his secret condition. Her job, reputation and name had all been on the line for a sin she was not guilty of, and so she truly felt she had had no choice in the matter. But she did not want him to think her untrustworthy and she regretted the circumstances which had led to her actions.

"Back to an empty house," Gideon said as he came in. He went immediately to his cane, perched next to the leather chair behind his desk. Through sheer obstinacy he had somehow managed to avoid its use during the past week, though she did not know how, especially since he was limping so badly now.

He leaned heavily on the cane as he moved to the window. It was a bright, sunny day, but the atmosphere in the library was anything but.

Things had changed between them.

There was, since she had visited his room the first night of his injury, an alteration in the dynamic between them, though on the face of it, their relationship had changed not at all. He was, to an observer, polite, kind, considerate. She was, as always, the diligent employee, attentive and careful.

In reality, though she had spent the past six days in the library hunched over mounds of paper and books, she had done very little work at all. She had spent a great portion of her time staring into space, tapping her pen, chewing her lip or worrying a hangnail, unable to concentrate on her work.

"You have been avoiding me," Gideon said, not turning to look at her. He gazed out the window, leaning freely on his cane, one hand

folded atop the other. Even from behind he was quite stunning; tall, broad-shouldered, slender. The sunlight fell on his chocolate hair, highlighting it in warm reddish tones.

"I..." Thea did not know what to say, and then because it was so obvious, admitted to it. "I have."

The fingers of his right hand tapped a cadence against his left. "Do you care to elaborate why?"

He kept his back to her, which was a good thing. It gave Thea more nerve. If he turned to her with those bright blue eyes she would falter for certain. Instead, she could stare at his back and not worry that her words did not match her expression. "It was not appropriate for me to be there. My place is here – "

His bark of dark laughter cut her off. "Your place."

Thea bristled. "My place, yes. If you have forgotten it, I have not. It is here, in this library, behind this stack of ink and papers and not upstairs in your bedchamber."

"What offended you, Thea?" Pivoting on the heel of his good leg, he turned to stare at her. "My words or my actions? Was it too much of one and not enough of the other?"

She frowned, confused. He looked angry, scowling and tight-lipped. "I will attribute your nasty comments to a foul disposition surely brought on by the aggravating circumstances of your recovery."

"By the devil, you will not!" Thea actually flinched when he yelled. "Pray do not attribute my foul disposition to anything of the kind. Do not disparage my words in such a manner. And if there is anything aggravating me," he pointed a finger at her, "it is you."

"I?"

"Oh, do not play coy with me."

"Really! As if I ever would!"

"Of course, I forget, the lovely Miss Ridley is beyond such cheap wiles as coyness. I venture to say you're completely unaware that you're even a female."

"Sarcasm is unnecessary," Thea retorted.

"Are you really as sanctimonious as you appear?" he scoffed.

Thea gasped in shock. She had no idea what had provoked this attack, for an attack it surely was, but she would have none of it. "Sanctimonious, is it? I see the way of it now. Because I dared spurn your advances." Her hands fisted at her hips. "It's the novelty of rejection, I daresay. Don't worry, I'm sure you will adapt."

He broke eye contact, looking for a moment as though she had uncovered a secret. Surely it could not be...

He tapped the walking stick with his boot-tip in a series of steady rhythms, as was his habit. "You could have come back to see me," he said moodily.

Thea took a deep breath. "I hardly thought that wise, after the events of that night." *The events*, she thought, where you kissed me and told me you loved me and desired me... The wanderings of an altered mind.

Maybe he had forgotten it; he had been under the influence of laudanum, after all. What a good thing that would be, she told herself, for then this awkwardness could pass and they could go on as before.

But he slanted a glance her way at that moment, a shot of blue from under coffee-dark lashes, and she knew he remembered every last detail. "Didn't you think we needed to finish our...conversation?"

"No." Thea licked her lips.

"My dear, dear Theadosia. Surely you don't think we can actually avoid this topic? Pandora's box has been opened; we must now deal with its contents."

"We must do no such thing. You were merely influenced by pain and medication, and perhaps gratitude towards me. That's all it was."

He stepped toward her, and he looked angry again. And something more, something she could not quite identify, something that made her feel hot and cold at once.

"Do you really believe that? Because you don't look at me like you do. In fact, you are looking at me like you know damn well that's not true. I don't like these games."

He was standing very near her now, and Thea was having a difficult time thinking. He smelled so good, soapy and clean, like he'd just stepped from his bath.

"I told you I loved you."

"Oh, stop! Don't say anymore!"

"Is the idea so repellant to you?" he asked coldly.

Thea shook her head, hanging on to her thoughts by a thread. Everything was swirling in her head, his words colliding with her own knowledge and hope and fear. "You cannot mean it," she said simply, quietly. That was the beacon in the chaos on her mind, the one thing she knew to be certain. The rest would have to fall into place behind it.

"Why would I say it," he lifted her chin and held her gaze, "if I did not?" She could easily identify the emotion in his eyes now: hurt.

And then there was nothing to see, for he lowered his mouth to hers in a kiss so hot and strong and demanding that Thea grasped his shoulders and gave into it, for she had no other choice.

The cane clattered to the floor.

His mouth on hers, open and wet; his arms around her, tight and sure; his hands on her back, grasping her derriere and lifting her to him so that his arousal pressed strong against the crux of her thighs.

It was surely the most exhilarating, passionate moment of her life.

Never, never...

Gideon's mouth moved to her throat, until his hands pushed down the front of her gown and then his mouth was there, on her bare breast and Thea could do nothing but push her fingers through his thick hair and hold him as she moaned.

His body was hard against hers, the strength and muscle of a man of action. With her hands she spanned the width of his shoulders, caressed the coils of his arms.

The feel of his hand moving up her skirt, his fingers brushing her bare thigh, brought her coldly and abruptly to her senses. She pushed away. A considerable feat, since he was pressed so tightly against her.

Gideon's blue eyes were dazed, his hair mussed. His cravat had come loose and drooped in an odd knot at his throat. Anyone coming upon them at this moment would not have to wonder at what sport they had been up to.

"Do you not want me?" he breathed. His chest rose harshly.

Thea closed her eyes, unable to look at him longer. *No,* she wanted to say, *I do not.* It would be the best response and would surely stop his pursuit. But he was standing there, so beautiful, so flushed with wanting *her* that she could not lie.

"You do," he said, his voice warm and close. She opened her eyes and he was reaching for her again. Thea knew one more touch would be her undoing and moved hastily away, putting as much distance between them as possible.

"Yes," she whispered, staring down at the carpet. "I cannot deny it."

"Then come to me." He extended a hand to her, palm up, fingers curled in invitation. The next move would be hers.

Thea fought back tears. To go to him, take his hand, submit... It was all she wanted. "Impossible."

"Thea..." he implored.

"Desire is well and good, for the moment. But what of tomorrow? Or the next month? What of me," she demanded harshly, "when you grow tired or bored?"

"What do you think of me?" he asked, stunned. "My God, I told you that I – "

"Do not say it!" she yelled. "Lust is not love – even I am not so brainless as to not know it. Please, please just leave me alone!" She would not, would not cry.

"Thea..." came his voice, ragged, unbelieving.

It was possible to admit that he wanted her; knowing it thrilled her with astonishing pleasure and need. But desire, she knew, was treacherous and changeable, and to place any credence in his passion would be the outside of stupidity. To think even for a moment that the hurt in Gideon's eyes was for anything other than his pride was

preposterous.

So, however much she was longing to see the look in his beautiful eyes, she turned her back without a second glance. She concentrated on the table before her, spread with ledgers, books, ink and quills. She would do her job and no more.

A tight pain radiated from the center of her chest into her head, but she did not cry.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"These roses only get more glorious with each passing year. I vow your mother had uncommon skill with them," Susan said in awe as she looked around the rose garden. "Gorgeous!"

Thea smiled at her enthusiasm. The rose garden was indeed spectacular, with more blooms and colors and fragrance than Thea could ever recall, as though thriving on the turmoil around it.

Susan and Thea took a seat on a little bench, letting the summer sun warm them. "I'm afraid I haven't inherited my mother's effortless garden skills. It just...keeps going." *Like me*, Thea thought. She stared down at the ground, observing a lazy bee that was investigating some fallen petals. She envied the bee for the clear path of its life: collect pollen, return to hive. Each and every bee with its role, none left without a place.

"I should spend all of my time here, were I you. It rivals Lord Birch's gardens."

Thea nodded.

"Oh, his party was delightful, was it not?" Susan continued. "But you seemed to be taken a bit odd, after the dowager Countess mentioned your mother, and then you simply vanished. I was a bit concerned, you know."

Thea wanted to say something, especially when Susan sent her a sideways look, but could not think of a response that would sound even remotely casual.

"I could not help but notice that the Viscount happened to go missing at the same time."

Thea looked at Susan, startled. Her friend's expression was kind.

"Thea, dear, his attentions were fairly obvious."

Panic swelled in Thea's chest, constricting her breathing. "Wh-what was obvious?"

"The way he looked at you. Lord Birch. It was as though he were mesmerized."

"Did-did anyone comment...?"

Susan hastily shook her head and covered Thea's hand. "Of course not. You know me and my fanciful notions, and of course he is so spectacularly handsome, so I'd no trouble staring and thereby just happened to observe... Oh, dear, do not distress yourself! I should not have spoken!"

Thea managed a mute nod. The panic abated somewhat, knowing that she was not once again the talk of the village.

"I thought you might find it flattering. I certainly would, if his attentions were turned toward me – oh, dear! Don't cry!"

Susan enveloped her in a hug as Thea wept. There was something about her friend's unfailing optimism and honesty that made Thea cry harder.

Susan, as quiet and solid as a rock, held her until she was able to regain some semblance of control. "You must think me a blubbering fool," Thea sniffed, fishing for a handkerchief and accepting Susan's when she could not find it.

"I think no such thing!"

"You should."

"Thea! Stop expecting me to reject you. I don't know whether I should be insulted or annoyed." Susan did look a little of both. "Nothing will stop me from being your friend," she finished quietly.

Thea felt grateful and ashamed of herself at once. Susan really was a loyal friend, and as open-hearted and caring a person as she had known. A ragged sigh escaped Thea when she tried to speak, so she merely sat.

After a while Susan broke the silence by tentatively asking, "How is Agatha today?"

Thea shrugged. "She sleeps most of the time, although when she is awake she seems in good spirits." Thea looked up at Agatha's window. "It won't be long now."

Susan gasped and followed Thea's gaze up to the window. "Surely the doctor—-"

"Can do nothing. It is her time."

"Your stoicism is admirable, Thea. I could never be as strong as you."

"You've never had to be," Thea said harshly. She softened her tone when she saw Susan's hurt look. "We all do what we must, when the time comes."

Susan nodded.

"I do not have the luxury of deluding myself, Susan," Thea explained. "I must accept reality, no matter how unpleasant, or how I might wish to believe otherwise."

Susan had a queer tense look on her face and then spoke quickly. "Then I shan't spare you the news I've been dreading to relay: John and Cecily are back."

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"The honeymoon," Cecily giggled in her little-girl laugh, "was lovely. John indulged my fondness for Paris and extended our stay there. Oh, it is simply divine – they have the loveliest shops and I've gotten heaps of new gowns which I daresay aren't even worn yet in London!"

Her comments were met with appropriately envious 'oohs' and

'ahs.' Thea briefly met Susan's gaze, thinking this plan had not been such a good idea after all.

"You need to go on the offensive, so to speak," Susan had said after dropping her bombshell regarding the happy couple's return to Littleover. "Make a point of meeting them and you shan't be taken by surprise. More importantly, it should do wonders to quell the wagging tongues if you show yourself to be unaffected by their company."

She wished now that she had not agreed. They were at a tea in Cecily's honor, and for the past half hour the woman had done nothing but discuss her European honeymoon. The blushing bridegroom, mercifully, had as yet to make an appearance.

Cecily was not a bad sort. Only frivolous, and more than a little dim, and undeterred in her vacuous descriptions of the shops she had visited while abroad.

But Thea sat on pins and needles, knowing that at any moment she would come face to face with John, and how did one confront the man who'd broken one's heart?

Susan sent her a calming look, silently reminding her of their strategy.

"...and there were the most darling little hats I'd ever seen! Such clever workmanship – John, darling!"

The bridegroom had arrived.

There was a clucking among the assembled females as he entered the room and made straight for Cecily. "Dearest," he said, pressing a kiss to the back of her hand. He gazed at her for a long, loving second before turning to the rest of the occupants. "Ladies, I bid you good day."

Then he spotted Thea. His eyes widened and he coughed to cover his shock. Heart pounding, she met his gaze unflinchingly as the room went silent around them. He was just as blond and handsome and charming as Thea remembered, though with a new fullness to his face and form. It was all she could do to look at him.

Recovering quickly, he schooled his features into their regular charming expression and returned to the task of devoted husband. The others, Thea was relieved to observe, gave up their perusal of her. "Enjoying yourself, darling?"

Cecily giggled again and actually batted her lashes at John. "I'm telling them all about our trip, John, and all about my wonderful new gowns..." She went on again, describing her shopping experiences in painstaking detail.

Remembering the intellectual nature of their conversations, Thea wondered how John stood it. For all his faults, he was intelligent and well-read, and she sincerely doubted that new gowns and bonnets were a subject to stimulate his mind. It was the sacrifice one made for

such a hefty dowry, she assumed.

She stole a look at him, forcing all emotion from her face. It was a difficult thing to do, for the sight of him perched on the arm of Cecily's chair, watching her with a look of fond interest was almost more than she could stomach. The last time she'd seen that look, it had been aimed at her.

"...several more trunks to be shipped to me..."

Were it not for the satisfaction such an act would provide for the gossips, Thea would run from the room. She contemplated it anyway, thinking that she could just keep going and leave Littleover altogether, running and running until she collapsed in a heap somewhere far from this place. Of all the things she could think of not ever wanting to do, sitting here watching John Godfrey fawn over his vapid wife was definitely high in the rankings.

There was a pressure against her foot and Thea looked up. Susan appeared engrossed in Cecily's tale, nodding and exclaiming at all the right places, but there was a little lift to the corner of her mouth. She pressed against Thea's foot again in a show of support, giving Thea the small bit of strength she needed to hold her ground.

Thea pressed Susan's foot back in a gesture of thanks.

"...yards and yards of such glorious silk! Oh, if only you could see it! I only hope we can go back to Paris soon."

When John smiled into Cecily's eye, she blushed. He raised a brow and she gave a small nod, turning even redder. "As soon as your health permits, my dear. You know I won't have you traveling in your condition."

Expertly and perfectly staged. The newlyweds were enveloped in a crush of compliments and congratulations. Cecily blushed some more and then took it as her signal to begin categorizing the purchases she had thus far made on behalf of the upcoming arrival while John beamed at her proudly.

Thea stared at them stupidly, unable to digest the news which should have come as no surprise at all. The begetting of children was, after all, one of the primary motivations to marry. Fortunately, Susan rose to her rescue, concocting an elaborate excuse about a visiting aunt from Sussex that had her and Thea away from the tea party in a trice.

It was a perfect day, beautiful and sunny. They walked in silence in the sunshine; Thea guessed that poor Susan simply did not know what to say.

"At least it's over with," Susan finally said as they were nearing Thea's house. "You won't have to wonder when you'll meet them, or under what circumstances, and now you know that you can come face to face with John and handle yourself with dignity and aplomb."

"Is that how I handled myself?" Thea asked.

Susan nodded emphatically. "You were brilliant – well, until the very end, when you went a bit peaky after their announcement, which was in very poor taste, in my opinion. Hardly the thing one wants to hear about so soon."

Thea skeptically raised a brow.

Susan laughed. "But it was nothing – nothing! – to the look on John's face when he saw you! Positively pained, he was, and you not batting an eyelash. Oh, Thea, I know it is probably horribly vengeful of me, but I did love to see him squirm!"

Thea laughed and hugged her friend, glad in Susan's support, if not in the day's events.

–

The good thing – or rather, the one simple thing about working with Lord Gideon Birch was the liberty he allowed her with his books. Thea was free to borrow anything at any time, and she made full use of Gideon's generosity. In truth he would have no idea if she were smuggling books home by the dozens, but the gesture was appreciated nevertheless.

Thus, with no reason to hurry, and every reason to lose herself in the alternate universe provided by reading, Thea read as she walked. Engrossed as she was in her pursuit, she did not notice John until spoke her name, by which point he was standing less than three feet from her.

She dropped her book.

"John," she said stupidly, as he moved forward and lifted the volume from the grass. He looked dapper and elegant, dressed in fine new clothing. The sun glinted off his hair in golden waves.

"Greek," he said appreciatively, eyeing the cover. "You've gotten new books."

"Oh, no, it is Lord Birch's," she replied and wished she hadn't when John raised his brows.

"Lord Birch?" he said, but Thea detected the questioning undercurrent.

"My employer," Thea answered shortly, annoyed with herself for feeling defensive. Nothing about her was any of John's business. "Surely you've heard," she said, taking the book from him, "that I'm working as a translator for Viscount Birch?"

John inclined his head, but did not respond. They stood in silence in the middle of a shady path that they had often walked together. Thea could not think of a casual way to walk past him.

"You look well, Thea," he said, just as nonchalantly as though they'd only parted a week ago and under far different circumstances.

Thea did not respond for the hot flash of anger that spiked through her. Under no condition would she allow him to see any reaction from her.

He smiled in an understanding way as his eyes studied her face. The day was sunny and warm, and John appeared perfectly at ease standing here next to her. Thea felt hot and uncomfortable, and could not think what stroke of ill-luck had brought them together this morning. Then she knew, because John said, "I've been waiting for you. Will you sit with me?"

"I am going to work." It was the perfect reason to start walking again, so she did with a dismissive nod, hoping he would not follow.

He did.

"Please, Thea, I only want to talk to you..."

"I cannot think of anything we have to say to each other," Thea lied. She could think of thousands of things to say, none of which were very kind to him or very flattering to herself.

"Thea..." he laughed, in that convivial way he'd always had, the way that implied she was being too prim and fractious for her own good.

"What is it, John?" She whirled to face him, gratified by his look of astonishment. "What is there that you could possibly want to say to me? And why do you think I would want to hear it?"

"I want to know how you are faring – "

"Very well, thank you. Goodbye." He stopped her by holding onto her arm.

"Hear me out! I understand your resentment, I do – "

Thea laughed harshly and shook his hand off. "How considerate of you. Truly you exhibit a heretofore unseen depth of insight."

"There's no need for sarcasm." Thea found the tell-tale hint of irritation in his manner very pleasing.

"No need, no need," she parroted. "Seldom do we get what we need, Mr. Godfrey. You, for instance, needed a sound thrashing not too long ago. Alas, 'twas not to be."

"I've never seen this side of you, Thea," he said, surprised. "Things must be very hard. Oh, God," he rubbed a hand over his eyes, "I am sorry for how I left you."

Thea's mouth opened and closed, and opened again, but no sound came out.

John paced, shaking his head. "How bad it must be," he said, almost to himself. "How you must have suffered. Thea, oh, Thea – can you ever forgive me?"

Thea looked into his familiar brown eyes and knew that the sadness and regret she saw there were real. She had, after all, known John Godfrey very well.

"I've thought of you all this time," he confessed, "prayed for your well-being. I did not imagine you would be brought to seek employment."

The implication roused Thea from her shock-induced stillness. "What did you imagine then?"

"To find you settled...married to one of the village lads."

"I am not you," Thea scoffed, "to give my affections so whimsically."

He looked hurt at her accusation. "Affection has little to do with the practical measures necessary to provide for the future. I did what I had to do, and so I explained, but I never gave you reason to doubt the sincerity of my feeling for you."

"How convenient for you."

"Sarcasm does not suit you," he snapped.

"I think you mean it doesn't suit you, John. And so neither does this self-aggrandizing speech masking as contrition. What did you hope to accomplish by seeking me out?"

"I understand your anger; I do, and no doubt deserve it. But Thea," he clasped her arms, his hands warm even through the fabric of her gown, "can you deny that you cared for me, as I did for you?"

"Yes," she said, but even to her own ears it sounded as a confirmation of everything she wanted to deny. She could not seem to break away from his touch.

John's features softened with oft-recalled tenderness; his hands caressed her arms. "It's still here between us, as I hoped it would be. Oh, Thea."

Thea was pressed into his chest as his arms wound around her, and the memory of pain and betrayal faded. As though she were the girl she once was, she allowed herself to sink stupidly into the false refuge of his embrace.

He smelled of crisp starch and cologne, a new scent that was not his. The soft coat under her cheek rustled as he spoke. "Perhaps I was a bit overeager," he said, "but I've made some preliminary arrangements – all the best, of course."

Thea pulled back as the oddity of his comment sunk in. "Best of what?" She did not like whatever it was she was missing.

John laughed heartily. "Of everything! I have the means now to provide for you, and I shall do it in a grand style. You deserve no less."

"Provide for me?" she repeated dully. "But you are already married – "

"Cecily has been having a difficult time, with the child. The doctor has suggested I not visit her bed for the time being." He shrugged. "Cecily is more aroused by shopping than her wifely duties."

It was the bluntness of his words that shocked her into awareness.

"You want me...as your mistress?"

John's eyes glowed amber as he smiled. "Paramour, if you prefer."

For one appalled moment she could not speak. The air seemed to have been sucked from her lungs, leaving her reeling. "Why would you make such a vile suggestion?"

His cocksure smile faltered. "Because I want you – I've always wanted you. It's my one regret that we never consummated our – "

"*That* is your one regret?"

"Listen to me!" He grabbed her hand and would not let go, though she tugged. "I can help you! I have the means at my disposal to provide you with a good life – "

"As your mistress!"

"With a decent house and clothes and food! There will be nothing left to worry about, Thea. You'll never have to think about working again."

"Except on my back?" she bit out, revolted. "How could you?"

"Don't you see?" he shouted. "It will solve all of our problems – we can be together."

Thea shook her head. "We can never be together – you saw to that when you took another woman to wife. You cannot buy me now."

"Think on it," he persisted. "You want me."

"No!" she gasped. He let her go, stricken.

His features darkened. "And what will you do when your money runs out, Thea, as I'm sure it will? You may have no choice but to sell yourself then."

"Never to you," she cried, more angry than she could ever recall being. "I would be whore to a hundred men before one to you."

There was a new flatness in his gaze. "Mark your words," he said through clenched jaw, "lest you have to regret them one day."

"If I have anything to regret from this day, 'tis that I've no means of doing you lasting physical harm. I would gladly give everything I own for a weapon."

His lip lifted in a condescending smirk. "Nevertheless, the offer stands. I am confident you will accept it one day, out of necessity or desire, it makes no difference to me."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Thea burst through the door, looking flushed, disheveled, and thoroughly out of sorts. Gideon, certain that some sort of confrontation was at hand, stood up from behind his desk.

She only stood there, glaring at the carpet. Gideon stared at her, silently bracing himself for whatever she was going to say.

After some minutes, he discerned that she wasn't going to say anything at all, and so resumed his seat, watching her. She moved without speaking to her worktable, rearranging the surface and flipping loudly through the pages of the growing catalogue.

He started when she slammed the cover shut.

"Why do men think I'm a whore?" she quietly asked the floor.

Gideon's mouth opened in astonishment. "What?"

"It seems," she continued tersely, "to be becoming a c-commonplace assumption about m-me." And then she burst into tears.

Gideon went to her side, instantly wrapping his arms round her and holding her against his chest. Such was the force of her sobs that Gideon began to grow afraid some serious harm had befallen her.

"It isn't true, it isn't," she mumbled through her tears.

"Hush. Of course not," he said into her hair. It smelled of sunshine and roses, and he inhaled before speaking. "I don't think you're a – " Even if it was to illustrate a point, he couldn't say the word whore in relation to her.

"No," she said, sniffing into his damp shirtfront. "You've never even implied anything of the like, even after...events between us." She inhaled shakily and drew back to peer into his face, looking for all the world as though she'd never seen him before. "You have ever been kind and interested in my welfare."

Gideon did not know if his motives regarding her were quite so noble, but held his tongue, stroking her back reassuringly. Very shortly, his knee began to pain him, for he was twisted over Thea's chair in an awkward manner. Taking her hand, he guided her to the sofa before the hearth, and she made no resistance when he settled her onto his lap. She only twined her arms around his waist, and laid her head trustingly against his chest.

Gideon, though anxious on her behalf, nevertheless experienced a pang of delight at holding her so close.

"Are you physically hurt?" he asked, relieved when she shook her head against his chest.

Murmuring small sounds of comfort, he stroked her back and neck as she continued to weep against him. "What is it, Thea? Who has wronged you?"

She gave a brittle laugh. "Will you defend my honor?"

"Yes," he answered with honesty and force, ignoring the sardonic undertone of her question.

She raised her gaze to his, and Gideon's breath caught at the sight of her perplexed eyes, so large, so vibrantly green against her wet black lashes. "I do believe you would," she whispered, raising her fingertips to his jaw. It was the slightest touch, but enough to prompt Gideon's undoing.

He wound his fingers into the back of her hair, fighting against the pins that held it coiled tight. Heart thudding in his chest, he pressed her close until her forehead rested against his. "Thea," he whispered, his mouth no more than an inch from hers. Never had he known such desire or longing. "All that and more. Every word I've said has been nothing more than the truth: I love you." How he wanted to taste her, to move that infinitesimal distance and place his mouth on hers. But he could not go forward until she trusted him, and knew he spoke the truth.

He felt the rapid turn of her breathing, soft exhalations against his lips. Her tears soaked his face.

And then she touched her lips against his, a shy movement of mouth and tongue, and Gideon's heart flipped in his chest, beating to the cadence of some new and wondrous thing.

–

There was nothing to think about as Gideon laid her back against the sofa. There was only the feel of his body atop hers; warm flesh and solid muscle, the wall of his chest, the strength of his leg between hers.

There was the pressure of his mouth, the touch of his hand. She made no protest when he peeled back her gown, revealing her breasts. She only moaned with the pleasure of his warm and clever tongue against her nipple.

This was Gideon. And she would take this irrevocable step with him, and let John Godfrey go to hell with the knowledge.

But Gideon touched her with an unexpected tenderness, and Thea found it impossible to misinterpret the significance of his intentions. Gideon, sincere and honorable, and incapable of lying about love.

Thea nearly wept with the knowledge. She trembled as he stripped her, knowing that she was not only naked, but defenseless before him. She watched as he disrobed, knowing that he had exposed himself to her long before, from the first time that he'd said he loved her.

His body was hard, muscled and lean. Hair dotted his chest and the plane of his belly, and grew darker around the unimagined strength of his arousal. He hovered over her, arms locked as he stared down.

"You do understand there's no going back, after this," he said, voice strained and hoarse.

Thea nodded, unable to speak. Not only for the fierce surprising beauty of his warrior's body, but for the hot desire that had taken hold of her. She wanted to feel his skin pressed against hers, the heat of him penetrating to the very core.

His hand moved between her legs, touching in a manner both gentle and rough that sent Thea arching bowlike over the armrest. And when his mouth followed suit, she bucked, nearly sending them both to the floor.

He held fast, his hands gripping her tight around the hips, his tongue, it seemed, now the very center of her existence. The idea that Gideon would put his mouth there, combined with the erotic thrill of the very real act sent Thea over some edge of spiraling, convulsive pleasure. She rocked against Gideon's mouth, moaning his name.

Then his long body pressed against hers, the contrast of his coarse chest against her breasts sending a current through her. With a tentative hand she reached down and touched him, wanting to know the feel of his flesh.

"I want..." she whispered, unsure of how to name the myriad needs within her. She wanted to please him.

"I want you," he answered and kissed her, and slowly moved inside her. She gasped into the saltiness of his mouth. It was a shocking sensation, pressure edged with pain and the sense of being filled by him completely. But when he moved again – a long, slow withdrawal – pleasure surged through her.

Gideon's eyes flashed a stormy blue, a color that reminded Thea of the volatile ocean during the sea voyage to England from Greece. As he watched her, she embraced him, letting the sleek muscle of his shoulders glide beneath her hands, feeling the heat of him all around her.

There was a sudden new tension and urgency in the mounting friction of his movements. Thea arched her hips against the breathless expectancy, awash in quivering delight just as Gideon's breath caught and he pushed himself deep inside her, shuddering and crying out her name.

He was still for a long time, his breath fanning the juncture of her neck and shoulder where he laid his head. Thea held fast to him, smoothing over the sweaty contours of his back, unwilling to think, unable not to do so.

They were still, and quiet, for a very long time. Thea would not move, fearful that doing so would break the spell that had come over them. In this moment there was nothing but the weight of him on her, skin to skin, their hearts separated by a mere wall of flesh and bone.

She cradled Gideon with her body, but the refuge was hers.

They were yet joined, and though in many ways it might be true, she could not feel that what they'd done had made her a whore. Or mayhap it had and she simply didn't care, she thought recklessly. She pushed aside a threatening sense of regret and concentrated on the sensation of his body breathing against hers.

He was bigger and stronger than anyone she'd ever touched, the sheer power of his body a marvel to her. It covered her like a shelter, and for the moment she let herself believe in the impression. She inhaled his scent, and ran her fingers through his dark hair, eliciting a hum of contentment from him. She would have liked to kiss him, but was too shy for it.

He raised his head. His eyes were slumberous, his hair tousled. She could not stop herself from tracing the line of his scar, her fingers moving over the thin white line at the edge of his lip.

He kissed her forehead, the arc of one eyebrow. "We should dress," he said, and it was as he withdrew from her that the edge of panic began to creep into Thea's muddled thoughts. She had done something that could not be undone.

"And this?" She traced a faint scar that ran across his forearm, a faded narrow white line that still bespoke of some calamity.

"Brandy," he scoffed. "I was in the Captain's cabin when we took a French cannonball. The brandy decanter shattered and sliced my arm. It did hurt, though it seemed foolish in the extreme to be wounded by a bottle of brandy."

"And here," her fingers touched the line above his lip. "How did you get this?" She was going head to toe, mapping the scars and lines of his body, learning the origins of every wound.

"Ah, that," he said, touching his tongue to the mark. "That I obtained before the war." He glanced down to see her questioning look. "I took a tumble down a flight of stairs in a fight, over a woman. Very foolish. I'm sure that confirms every ignoble notion you have of my character."

"I don't have any ignoble notions of your character!"

"You should," he said, and she made an exasperated sound, turning her head away.

The afternoon sun lit his bedchamber with low oranges and yellows, and through the open window could be heard all the birds and buzzing insects of a summer's day. Instilled with a reckless daring brought on by mutual desire, they had stolen up here and made love. It must have been hours ago.

After a while, Thea asked, "And was the lady pleased, that you had fought for her honor?"

"I did not say she was a lady," he replied evenly, "nor possessed of any honor worth defending."

Thea stared at the window, unsure of how to respond, what to think. She twirled a strand of hair around her finger in silence.

He took her hand, interrupting the action. "Thea." She looked up at him, watched as he put her fingertip into his mouth and bit lightly. Thought fled. "Thea," he said again, lowering his mouth to hers, pressing her back into the bed, back into the preferable erotic state where her concerns became as heedless as her body.

It was intoxicating; he was intoxicating. Once in his presence, all resolution of maintaining sense and reason fled. She wanted only to be with him, study his face, listen to his voice, feel his arms tight about her. She struggled to hold onto her wits, all the while longing to throw all caution and prudence to the wind and give herself over to him completely.

The notion terrified her.

He had her body; she gave it freely, with the abandon of newly

discovered desire.

Away from him, she grieved for herself and her inability to surrender to the longing within her.

–

"What," Thea asked, extending the paper to Gideon, "is the meaning of this?"

He took it from her, studying her face with a slight frown of concern before turning his attention to the letter. He scanned it quickly and let out a rush of air between clenched teeth before looking back at her.

"My brother," he answered, tossing the letter onto the desk. He leaned against the edge of the table, watching her.

"Why would he do this?"

"Why does he do anything? I've not the slightest notion. I think he's incapable of not interfering with my life."

"But how does he even know?"

"Likely my mother mentioned something to him," Gideon shrugged, but she could see the tension in him. "And he simply could not begin to comprehend that the matter has nothing to do with him."

Thea glanced down at the letter, familiar with its brief, albeit surprising, contents.

Dear Miss Ridley,

It has recently come to my attention that you are not only a gentleman's daughter, but the granddaughter of one as well. I refer of course to Baron Warburton. I believe you have a reasonable claim to petition a share of support from the late Baron's family, and offer the assistance my position can provide if you are interested in doing so.

Clybourn

"I didn't even know he'd died," Thea said, still looking at the piece of paper.

Gideon gave her a puzzled look.

"The Baron," she elaborated. "My grandfather."

"Does it sadden you?"

"His treatment of my mother saddened me, for he turned his back to her and cast her out when she married my father, but I cannot grieve for a man I did not know."

Gideon glanced down at his boot tapping the tip of the cane. "And what do you think of my brother's offer?" he asked with a speculative glance.

"I find it in keeping with what little I know of your brother's character: rude, presumptuous and overbearing! He seems to be

making amends for believing me to be a low woman, and yet I have the strong feeling that accepting his offer would only confirm his initial opinion. It's a test, you see?" she said, tapping a finger against the letter.

"If I take him up on his offer, then I am clearly taking advantage of you and your connections to elevate myself."

Gideon shot her a wry smile. "I think Simeon would be most disturbed to discover you've so aptly read his motives."

Thea rolled her eyes.

"Still," Gideon continued in a thoughtful tone, "there is some validity to his suggestion: you would have a claim to support from the baron's family."

Thea shook her head. "It is a preposterous notion. I've no claim on them, nor have they any on me. They are strangers. I only hope your brother has not contacted them." Her throat tightened with anger and anxiety at the notion of her grandfather's family believing she was appealing to them.

"Then the idea has never occurred to you?" he asked, watching her. She shook her head. "Nor to me," he added quietly, looking down at the letter from his brother.

It took a moment for understanding to dawn. "Your brother is not doing me a service, I assure you."

"Still, he did realize that you might need assistance in reconciling with your relatives. I never did."

Thea looked at him. "I don't need his assistance."

"Of course not," Gideon replied. "But you might need mine, and I never even thought to offer it."

She walked over to him and placed her hands on his arms, the feel of him solid and warm beneath her touch. "I would ask if I needed your help. And you would give it, that I know." She smiled up at him, stirred by his burst of protectiveness. The warmth spread from her fingertips up her arm, moved through her in a current of desire and need. She saw the echoing shift in his eyes, the spark of passion igniting the deep blue center of his gaze. It burned through her, that look, scorching a path she knew would leave its eternal mark.

"Walk with me," he said, his voice husky, his meaning clear. And so she did, followed him out the side entrance of the library and out over the meadows and up the hill, taking his arm when they were far enough away from the village to avoid being seen. They walked in silent anticipation, she leaning against him, letting his leg brush against hers, letting her breast graze his strong arm.

She had a sudden wish they could go on this way forever, side by side across the green grass and under the azure sky. For a moment she allowed the notion and then quelled it.

They lay down together in the cool grass of a shady copse, for all they knew or cared, the only two people on earth. Thea allowed Gideon to remove every article of her clothing, and he did the same. They made love in the dappled splendor of their castle of trees and leaves, and she clung to him, arched against him, his name a plea and a promise as it fell from her lips.

–

"What shall I bring you from London?"

The late afternoon sun flooded the library with light. Gideon sat at his desk, Thea at hers, upholding a pretense of the work they were supposed to be doing. Mostly they gazed at each other and smiled, or in Thea's case, looked away when the heat of his gaze became too much. Even seated her legs felt unsteady, her entire body soft and pliant, melted by recalled ardor.

"London?" she parroted, surprised.

He made a sound of assent. She looked down at the papers spread messily across her desk – disorder, where once there had been perfect order – and bit her lip to stop from asking him to elaborate.

"A wedding, actually," he said. "A friend from the Navy. I should return within a sennight."

"How lovely," Thea murmured. She felt a ridiculous spurt of jealousy; she did not want him to go away.

She glanced at him and could see the anticipation writ in the small upward curl of his mouth. *Of course, of course,* he will go to London and be happy for it. He will go anywhere it pleases him to do so.

She had allowed herself to pretend, these days with him, sacrificed prudence and judgment to the thrall of his body and the wicked things it did with hers. Mouth, eyes, hands, heart. Just because she had subdued knowledge did not mean it had disappeared; it was here now, mocking her with the severity of its return, like a face-full of bitterly cold water. She could not chastise herself or him or anyone at all for the situation that was.

The very harsh reality of the situation was this: No obligation prevented him from coming and going as he pleased, no commitment bound him to her. Nor would it. She would not deceive herself and allow expectations of more. Gideon was a rake. Perhaps a kind and oddly honorable one, but a rake nevertheless. And if marriage were ever his aim, his brother the Earl would likely have a supply of candidates at the ready, and an impoverished village girl with no connections wasn't likely to make the list.

No, she had harbored hopes for marriage once, with John, and was clear-eyed enough to not do so again.

She stared at her desk, shuffling a stack of papers.

One word interrupted her daze. "Don't."

She looked up. His brows were drawn together in two harsh lines, the corners of his mouth turned inward in a frown, and she realized that her true mistake had not been in deluding herself. That was merely a blunder in the face of the huge miscalculation of falling in love with him.

"Stop whatever it is you're doing," he commanded.

"I'm not doing anything," Thea replied steadily, though her heart pounded like a mad drum. "Which I believe defies the purpose of my employment. I really have let the work accumulate." Head bent, she shuffled through the papers, moved a pile of books, looked for the inkwell until his boots appeared at the edge of her vision. She did not look up.

"You're rationalizing."

"Is that what I'm doing?" She allowed a moment of irritation at him for dragging her into this situation.

"Thea," he said with a half-laugh. "I will be back."

Of course he would. She kept her gaze on the table, terrified lest he see any hint on her face of the emotions roiling within her. Fear and love. Love and fear. One look at her and he would know, and she could not bear it.

He sighed and walked back to his desk. He would be back, but Thea could not dismiss the presentiment that his departure would change everything.

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That night Agatha had an attack of such severity that Thea was certain she would not live to see morning. Agatha could not speak and her eyes, when open, were glassy and unseeing. Her irregular shallow breathing was tinged by a trembling murmur that came from deep in her chest and made Thea go rigid with fear.

Thea held her hand, brewed her tea, dosed her with medicine, covered her up, shut the window, opened it again. She paced the room, gnawing her lip, fighting tears. Agatha's lucidity was intermittent, but she would not risk letting her see her agitation.

But somehow Agatha persisted until morning. Thea could not leave her to go to Birch House and bid Gideon some sort of farewell before his journey.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Thea jerked awake to the sound of Agatha gasping. She sprang from her chair beside the bed and helped the old woman sit up, pounding her on the back. Long, dubious minutes passed, but Agatha's breathing eased, and Thea laid her back onto the bed, staring at the disturbing pallor of her face. An alarming grayness had begun to tinge her skin.

Agatha mumbled something. "What? What did you say?" Thea implored, longing for coherence, but Agatha's eyes closed and she was asleep again. Thea covered her gently and went to stand at the window. There was nothing to be seen outside, only her own pale reflection in the windowpane, cast from the room's sole shimmering candle.

She had not seen another person in days, not since she had left Gideon's house. She lived suspended between the fear that Agatha would die at any second and that she would linger like this indefinitely, suffering, binding them both to this close little room.

Her mother had died in her own bedroom, down the hall. Thea had not been present, her father had not allowed it. Though he claimed it was in protection of her sensibilities, Thea had harbored a grain of suspicion that he'd wanted to spend those final moments alone with his beloved wife. She resented him a bit for it, but not as much as she'd resented her mother for dying.

Thea opened the casement and leaned out, drawing deep of the warm night air. The absolute darkness was lifting, edged with the first blue shades of dawn. She stood and stared out, content for the moment to do nothing more.

Suddenly, there was a furtive movement down below, a thump and one very loud oath. "Bloody hell!"

Thea hastily shut the window. With a glance at Agatha, she raced down the stairs and stopped at the front door, waiting. An undeniable flutter affected her heart at the thought that it must be Gideon. Still, she waited, ear pressed against the door. Finally, there came a muffled movement and then a soft knock and she opened the door.

"John!" she exclaimed, astounded.

"You sound disappointed. You were expecting someone else?"

"No," she lied, and then added, more forcefully, "Of course not."

John stood in her doorway. In the growing light, Thea could see his state of dishevelment; his normally dapper clothes were wrinkled and mussed, his cravat stained and untied.

He smelled of alcohol.

"John, it is the middle of the night!" She made to close the door,

but he stopped her, holding the edge of the rough oak door.

"Don't shut me out, Thea! I only came to talk, I swear it!"

"'Tis too late for calling hours. Or early." The door would not budge under his grip.

"I know you must despise me, but Thea, please," he released the door and stumbled against the frame, his eyes full of appeal. "I can't have you hate me. Not you. Let me make it right." He rubbed a hand over his red eyes and slumped where he stood.

Though he was foxed, she could not help but feel a spurt of sympathy; he looked so utterly dejected. With an audible sigh, she opened the door, saying, "I will fix you a cup of tea. You may say your piece and go."

The tea appeared to bring about some measure of sobriety. He turned a clear, abashed gaze at her after his second cup. "I've been thinking of you. Can't seem to get you off my mind," he said, with a morose little laugh. "I know I've hurt you, but God, Thea, if you knew what I was suffering..." Thea crossed her arms over her chest.

"I am sorry I offended you," he said in sudden contrition. He sat with his hands on his knees, rubbing his palms over his trousers. "Believe it or not, it was not my intention. I only thought we could be together, that I had some means of providing for you."

"I doubt you have known me at all, to think I would ever acquiesce," Thea said.

"Of course I knew you! Has anyone known you better?"

Thea chose not to respond. There was nothing she could say, as John was both right and wrong.

"I would have offered for you, you know, but there were financial circumstances... Well." He cleared his throat nervously.

"Why are you saying all this, John? It changes nothing." He rubbed his hands on his knees, over and over as he spoke.

"I've had a bad night, Thea," he said without looking at her. There was an edge to his voice that indicated something unpleasant had happened. "I've done something I regret."

Marrying Cecily, she thought he would say.

"A man has needs," he said instead, more to himself. He shot her a look, and Thea knew a moment of alarm at the image of raw desire in his eyes. She held her breath until he looked away, released it with a puzzled sound.

"I wanted you, for you, Thea. Can you understand that? But a man cannot live like a monk. It's not to be borne," he said. "You were my first choice, you know."

"John, it is very late." Thea overcome by the urge to sleep, lost patience. She regretted letting him into the house.

"I didn't mean to betray you," he said emotionally. "But Cecily has

turned me away – "

"You have had too much to drink and you need to go home," Thea said, standing. John remained seated, his gaze imploring.

"I need your forgiveness."

"For marrying Cecily? It is over and done. Please," she moved toward the door, suddenly realizing that she spoke the truth: The most she felt for John at the moment was distaste. Any lingering feelings she'd had for him had been abolished by his actions, and for the first time she was glad that he had married another.

"Not for Cecily – for tonight," he told her from his chair. "She meant nothing, I swear it! It was...physical. I needed...a woman."

Thea, confused and tired, lost all tolerance. "I do not need to hear about your wife!"

"Not Cecily, damn it! I've been with another woman!" He groaned, and pressed his face into his hands.

Thea's distaste turned to disgust as she stared at him, cowering behind his hands. She would not have thought it possible. "Why are you telling me this?" she asked in an appalled whisper.

He did not raise his head. "I want you to know how sorry I am." His voice actually broke.

"Shouldn't you be apologizing to Cecily?" Thea felt a burst of compassion for her old rival.

"I would never tell Cecily!" he retorted in outraged tones.

"Then why are you telling me?" Thea repeated, wanting him gone, but wanting to know.

"It's you I love, have always loved."

Once, Thea would have given everything she owned to hear him say those words. He meant it, she could see. Or thought he did. Now, she could only gape at him in dismay, frosty tentacles of revulsion creeping along her back.

Her lack of response must have reassured him, for he continued, "I have a nice house for you. Let me take care of you, Thea, let me share my advantages with you."

Thea wanted to believe that this man was different from the one she had known; that something in the intervening years had altered his fundamental morality. She searched his handsome, repentant face, looking for her old friend, the one she had cared for so. He was John, only flawed: Weak. Immoral. Drunk.

He rose, and came toward her. When he made to touch her, Thea flinched and stepped back, not wanting his hands on her for a moment.

"Your wife," she said, aghast, "is carrying your child."

"Thea, no, no." His voice choked off with emotion, and Thea thought he might cry at any moment.

"Go home, John," she said quietly. "I shan't speak to you again."

"You can't shut me out! Can you not at least appreciate my honesty? I didn't have to tell you anything!" he shouted, bolstered by some newfound sense of self-righteousness.

She wish to God he hadn't. She might at least have retained a morsel of value for the friendship the once shared. But all she said was, "I do not love you."

His face collapsed.

Agatha made a sound from above; their exchange had clearly gotten out of hand. John's mouth opened as if he would argue the point more, but then his shoulders slumped and he moved toward the door.

He paused with his hands on the knob, twisting it back and forth. "Only believe I never intended to hurt you," he said hoarsely without looking at her. When she did not respond, he turned and left her house.

Thea took a moment, trying to reconcile herself to the sense of loss that coursed through her, not so far beyond caring that she could completely forget what John had once meant to her. And then she turned, resolutely climbing the stairs to Agatha's sickbed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Thea knew, when Susan came to her door, that the very unusualness of the hour foretold a calamity of some proportions. It was too early for Susan to be about; the new sun had not yet even had time to dry the night's dew. But Susan did not seem to notice her wet slippers.

She came into the house, her features tight, her mouth grim. Thea would have felt more anxious, had she not been so utterly exhausted.

They went into the drawing room. Thea waited, physically perched on the edge of a chair, emotionally perched on a precipice whose fall she knew would be brutally long.

Susan cleared her throat and stared down at her hands. The dry feeling of dread in Thea's belly tightened and she could only stare at the top of Susan's bent head, noting the details of her bonnet, the green ribbon, the sole flower.

Susan took a breath, paused, glanced at Thea and looked away.

"Out with it, Susan!" Thea breathed, unable to bear the tension any longer.

Susan looked up and met her eye. "There is a terrible rumor in the village."

Thea blanched.

"They are saying you have been entertaining men, here in your house. At night."

"Wha..."

"I heard it last night, but it was too late to come to you. I wanted to reach you before...well, before the rumor did. Or someone else from the village."

Thea could not think of a single thing to say, thinking only that her relationship with Gideon had somehow gotten out. Someone had told, or seen... A burst of euphoric relief went through her as she realized something. "But Captain Birch has not been here in months, and certainly never at night!"

Susan's mouth dropped open, her cheeks turned bright red. "Captain Birch?" She sounded afraid, puzzled. Thea's delight vanished, replaced by a pain in her head. "I-I did not mention Captain Birch. His name has not been associated with yours..." Susan looked away, clearly discomfited.

"Then...who?" Thea managed to squeeze out.

"A man was seen leaving your house at dawn."

A man, at dawn? No. Oh, no...

"'Twas John. That was why I did not believe it. I knew you would never..." Susan trailed off, obviously no longer sure of anything where

Thea was concerned.

Thea fought back the urge to swear.

"It is ridiculous, I know, to even pretend you would be entertaining John. Isn't it?"

Something must have shown in Thea's face, for Susan looked stricken. "Isn't it?" she repeated.

"He was here the other night, Susan, but nothing happened."

Susan gasped.

"He came of his own accord! I did not invite him or entice him or even want him here!"

"But you did let him in?"

"He begged me. He was foxed." Thea pushed the palms of her hands against her eyes, as if the gesture could blot out this terrible morning.

"But a man, in your house, in the middle of the night..."

Thea bit her tongue, her anger suddenly turned against Susan and her perfectly compartmentalized little life. No one would approach her with an indecent offer, or come to her door at an indecent hour. Everything in her life was completely proper and fine, because she had a father and a mother who saw to it. But it would not be fair, or even productive to vent her frustration upon her. This was the one friend she had in Littleover. Second, she amended, thinking of Gideon. Doing so caused a rush of such intense longing for his return that tears pricked her eyes. Gideon, her knight.

"I let him in, for the sake of what he once was to me. We talked, he left. Nothing more. You do believe me?"

Susan turned her head to study her slippers once again. "What could a married man need to discuss in the middle of the night?"

Thea gasped as though struck in the chest with the realization that Susan, *Susan* did not believe her.

"Perhaps you think me stupid, or awfully naïve, but I do have some knowledge of men and women," Susan said.

"I don't think that at all," Thea replied weakly, for she did actually consider Susan naïve, blessedly so, for her simple life was unfettered by worries of survival.

Very well, she thought, deciding to forthrightly deal with Susan's supposed sophistication. "John does – did – want me in that way. He has propositioned me twice, offering to establish me in my own house. I declined. John came here to beg my forgiveness for going to another woman – not Cecily, mind you, who is currently incapable of performing her wifely duties, but another woman altogether. Likely a barroom doxy for all I know.

"Naturally I asked him to leave, and I can say with the utmost honesty that I will be pleased to never lay eyes on him again. Does

that, my dear friend," Thea's voice cracked, "satisfy you that I have done no wrong?"

A second later Thea was encompassed in a crushing flurry of muslin and lace as Susan launched herself at her, enveloping her so tightly that Thea had trouble breathing.

"I'm so-sorry!" Susan sobbed, her tears wetting the shoulder of Thea's dressing gown. "I am no friend, to have doubted you for a second!"

Thea patted her on the back. "There, there," was all she could say, overcome by the turbulence of emotions since Susan had come in.

"I will understand if you never speak to me again, I will," Susan said thickly, adjusting herself to look at Thea. They were squeezed together, both sitting in the same armchair. "But I beg your forgiveness."

"There is nothing to forgive," Thea answered instantly. "You are the dearest friend I have."

And then, in between further apologies and avowals of friendship, they both had a good cry.

"Thea?" Susan asked after she'd stopped sniffling. "Why did you think it had to do with Lord Birch?"

"I-I just assumed, since I work for him." Thea felt hot, the tightness in her chest impairing her breathing. If Susan should guess...

How funny, she thought in a completely humorless way, to fear exposure, when likely the entire village already thought her embroiled in an affair with John. But *she* knew it wasn't true.

"Mmm," Susan said, looking down at the rug. "We must strategize. It will be a very difficult thing, since he really was here. Oh, I cannot believe him! Poor Cecily."

"I had the same thought," Thea said grimly. "It could have been me. That is – " she swallowed, embarrassed. "If John had ever asked me. To-to marry him, I would have said yes, and been happy about it. I thought he was such a good man, and I would have been so wrong." She was not thinking of John now, but of another, sky-blue eyes and enchanting white scar. Reassurances and pretty words. She chewed her lip.

"It does all seem dreadfully uncertain."

At the least, Thea thought. She wanted to look into Gideon's eyes, fall into the haven of his arms and return to certainty. She thought she could not wait until his homecoming.

They agreed that Susan would go into the village to judge the extent of the damage and return later in the day to confer with Thea, who for her part, spent her time looking in on a sleeping Agatha and wandering her house. When Susan returned, she confirmed the worst of Thea's fears.

"It is all anyone can discuss." Susan looked markedly more fatigued than when she had first arrived in the early morning hours. "It is a colossal scandal. I do not know how it can be rectified," she added bluntly.

Thea felt something inside herself sliding away, some vestige of hope. "Is there no one who believes in me?"

"Mr. Everleigh has urged everyone to remember the evils of gossip. Perhaps it has helped a bit. And I roundly denied everything that was said as the veriest falsehood."

It hurt. It still hurt, after all this time, after knowing, really, what the outcome could be. John Godfrey was seen leaving her house in the wee hours of the morning – what else could anyone possibly believe? She would not allow herself to marvel at the unfairness of it.

"There may be one hope."

Thea looked at Susan, grasping, eager for any chance at salvation.

"It's only a thought and I'm not sure how much influence can be brought to bear – "

"Susan!"

"Very well! If Lord Birch will stand for you, it might alleviate the worst of the scandal. I don't think anything could erase it entirely, but certainly no one in the village can snub you if a Viscount chooses to support you."

Thea held her breath. Yes, Gideon. She wanted to laugh with relief, knowing that he would do that much for her. Gideon, the Viscount, the warrior, her friend, her lover. She closed her eyes and breathed out a tremendous sigh.

"He will stand for me," Thea said, opening her eyes and looking at Susan.

"Can you be sure of it?" Susan asked, her expression guarded, brows furrowing in suspicion, though she tried to hide it.

Too relieved to begin worrying again, Thea could only answer, "Yes." And finally allowed herself a sigh of relief.

–

Rains struck the windows with a scattered, ill-tempered beat; lightning flared across the countryside, illuminating the night sky in surreal eerie spurts; thunder, dense and deep, shook the little house on its very foundations.

Thea stood at the window, gazing out, arms wrapped about herself, watching the ominous storm. Bone-weary, she longed for sleep, days and days of nothing but sleep, yet rest eluded her. Her body moved of its own accord, governed by some primordial order to continue. At most, she was capable of a light doze, and even that was short-lived, her eyes opening, opening, searching for hope.

He did not come.

Two days. Two days had passed since Gideon's planned return.

And he did not come.

She gazed out the window, envying the weather its violence, the sheer unleashed rage that controlled, for the moment at least, everything around her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

This evening he found himself seated next to Miss Coopersmith. Not an enormous coincidence, as it was her parents hosting the dinner party and their wishes regarding their daughter and Gideon could not have been clearer. An invitation which he had long ago accepted and promptly forgotten about, coinciding with the same evening of his delayed return from London, forestalling his desire to see Thea immediately.

Which, he thought, was perhaps just as well, though it chafed him; he wanted to see her. The distance of London had nicely provided him with a bit of perspective. He'd lingered there longer than planned, liking the notion of Thea cooling her heels, waiting for him. In the presence of old friends and old haunts, the hint of a former life, he felt jumbled and confused, not himself, the man who'd always maintained the upper hand with a woman. He could recall, with precise detail, each and every time he'd confessed his love to her, but never once had Thea said anything in kind.

"How is your dear niece, Captain?" Miss Coopersmith asked.

"Very well."

"I pray you will send her my regards when next you write. She is such a lovely girl."

"I shall."

"I am trying to persuade Papa to take a house in Town next season. I do so love London, its diverse and sophisticated amusements, but Papa does have a preference for the country. Certainly you will be returning for the season?"

"I've developed a certain preference for the country myself," he replied, and watched with horror as Miss Coopersmith blinked and blushed as though the comment had been pertaining to her. "The fresh air," he quickly added, "the quiet, the lack of hustle and bustle. And my dogs need space to roam – you do remember my dogs?"

She seemed to take his point, for her face fell a bit. "Your dogs. Of course." She sipped her soup, and then asked, "But do you not find village life tedious? London has so much more to offer."

Gideon inclined his head. "It does. It also offers a great deal more commotion than I care to have in my daily life." It had been well at first, seeing old friends, but after a few days of the old clubs and gossip, he'd grown tired. Crowded London seemed to steal his air, people and filth everywhere, and he'd actually longed for Birch House, its open rooms and acres of green parkland. He'd most longed for the library, the smell of paper and ink underlaid by the scent of rain and sweetness that was Thea.

Miss Coopersmith laughed. "Littleover might be dull at times, but I never claimed we didn't have our fair share of drama." She continued eating, casting a look down the table at the young couple seated near her father.

"How is your library coming along?" she asked suddenly. "It was really so very kind of you to take Miss Ridley into your employ."

"Kindness had no part in it," Gideon admitted. "Miss Ridley had the skills I required." He turned to his soup.

"How modest you are, my lord. Surely you must admit to some measure of charity, at the least, in overlooking Miss Ridley's reputation?"

Gideon's spoon halted in mid-air for a second, before he forced himself to bring it to his lips. Miss Coopersmith was clearly dying for him to know something about Thea. Gideon wanted to know, but allowed only an impartial, "Oh?"

"How humble you are!" she exclaimed.

"That is not often a word associated with my character, Miss Coopersmith."

"Please, you must call me Lydia, as all my friends do."

He inclined his head in acknowledgment and continued eating, knowing a show of indifference would hasten her elaboration.

It did.

"Thea is a lovely girl, to be sure, but a bit unwise. And of course an orphan, without the proper guidance, can hardly be expected to exhibit the modesty of an English girl." Lydia took a neat sip from her glass, once again eyeing the couple down the table; an obvious invitation for Gideon to do the same.

He gave the blond man and his wife a cursory glance. The man talked and talked as though nervous of silence, but his wife sat quietly, staring morosely at her uneaten food. "Miss Ridley is English," he said.

Lydia shrugged. "But reared in foreign parts, my lord, and one never does know what to expect from the conduct of foreigners."

Gideon looked into his soup, doubting she'd ever met a foreigner in her life.

"One cannot deny that her friendship with – " she glanced down the table and lowered her voice, " – Mr. Godfrey was completely suitable, though she can hardly be reproached for her fascination; he is a handsome man. And to anyone's knowledge, their connection was completely appropriate. But you do know how tongues wag."

Gideon looked again at the blond man, laughing with Mr. Coopersmith. He remembered the day Thea had come into the library, so upset, asking why everyone thought her a whore.

"How good of you to disregard the gossip," Lydia said quietly, "and

allow Thea the benefit of the doubt. I'm sure her linguistic skills more than make up for any stain upon her character, especially with...recent events. And poor Mrs. Godfrey in a delicate condition."

Gideon looked at Lydia, and a part of him marveled at the neat way she'd delivered the slanderous information. He put down his spoon, his appetite suddenly vanished.

"Recent events?" he asked, no longer concerned about appearing indifferent.

"Surely you've heard...but no, you have been away..." Miss Coopersmith managed a look of what he was sure was perfectly contrived discomfort. She lowered her voice considerably, causing Gideon to lean in, the sleeve of his jacket just brushing her gloved arm. "Mr. Godfrey, I am afraid to say, was seen leaving Thea's home at dawn, and, well, one can only draw the obvious conclusions..."

Gideon felt a sick twist of jealousy in his gut, and then a stronger sense of betrayal. He tempered his reaction, telling himself not to jump to conclusions.

"I cannot help but find it unlikely that Miss Ridley would be entertaining a gentleman at night, in her home."

Miss Coopersmith shot him a pitying look, laced with a hint of triumph. "There is no question; he was there. The entire village is talking of it."

It could not be. He simply could not believe that Thea would be seeing another man...

And yet.

There was a part of the story that fit, some unnamed suspicion that she'd met someone the day she'd come in, so troubled, distressed, crying, melting in his arms.

"...an unimaginable scandal in this little place," Miss Coopersmith was saying. "So brazenly coveting another woman's husband. I'm not sure exactly what poor Cecily has heard..."

He forced down his suspicions, quelled his jealousy. A word, a look from her, and it would all be explained away as a stupid mistake. But what did he know? He'd had woman after woman and never once thought of love. He'd never been anything other than solely in command of the situation, allowing perhaps a brief infatuation, but always easily able to retain control of his emotions and move on to the next adventure. He'd no experience of love, of the things he felt for Thea. She gave him no inkling of her own feelings, and it was not impossible to suppose that her emotions did not correspond to his.

He knew well enough how to leave a woman; he'd no idea how to deal with one he wanted to keep.

Miss Coopersmith droned on as Gideon fought against something he'd never before encountered: uncertainty. It was an altogether

disagreeable sensation, and he found himself resenting Thea because of it. An illogical notion, but there it was.

But there was no explanation, other than the obvious one, that she had been entertaining John Godfrey in her house, alone, at night, for there was no sign of Thea. As the days stretched on, she made no appearance at Birch House, for work, for explanations, for love, and her absence, Gideon feared, only spoke to her guilt. Obviously, she did not know how to face him.

The uncertainty was a trap. He would not, could not go to her, ruled by a mixture of anger, hurt and stubborn, useless pride. For once, she must come to him. She must come to him and when she did, though it choked him to admit it, he would in all likelihood forgive her.

She did not know how to forgive him.

Traveling through the dense gray dawn, one foot in front of the other, her stupid, silly shoes soaked from the dew, she had walked to Birch House, to Gideon, knowing only that she needed shelter and he would give it. Walking, knowing there would be a reasonable explanation for his delayed return, for his absence of over two weeks.

She had moved in a miasma of grief, beyond tears, or perhaps not yet at the point of weeping, knowing no solace save that which Gideon would provide.

Delayed by family...Mother in town...Friend took ill... There would be some plausible, sane, regular reason why he hadn't been to see her, something of the utmost ordinariness that prevented him from seeking her out. And then she could sigh, and say, *How relieved I am! Think nothing of it!*, and he would put his arms around her, and in the strength of their shelter she could finally give way to the sorrow walled inside her.

Earlier in the evening, she had left Agatha and gone into the kitchen, to make tea, to look at something other than the deteriorated face of her friend, and when she had returned, Agatha was staring at the ceiling with un-seeing eyes, devoid of breath, or life, or the comfort of Thea's presence in her final moments. All those hours of sitting at her bedside and it had regardless come to a solitary death.

She had walked to Birch House and waited in the library until Gideon came in and started at the sight of her.

–

"Thea!" He jumped when he saw her, standing near the garden door like an unexpected apparition. She had on a long cloak, the bottom hem dragging wetly on the carpet. Half of her hair seemed to have slipped from its usual knot, hanging down over her shoulder in an auburn tangle. "You gave me a start. You should move into the light, or announce yourself."

She moved toward him and stopped. "Announce myself?" Her eyes, round and green, gave him a puzzled look.

He moved a hand, not knowing what to say, annoyed at this tardy appearance. Her mouth moved as though she were about to speak, then stilled. Gideon turned to his desk, taking his time in seating himself, dreading the revelations that were certain to come. He shot her a glance and then watched his boot kicking the tip of his cane, pushing away images of her with another man.

A long uncomfortable silence settled over the room.

Finally, Thea spoke, asking, "D-did you return last night?"

"Five days ago," he said, abruptly raising his head at her inhalation of surprise. Shock, perhaps, that he should have been in Littleover long enough to hear the rumors about her?

"So long? But..."

"Thea," he said impatiently, "I do wish you would come into the room."

She stood where she was, clutching at the folds of the cloak around her.

"Quite frankly," he said, "I was expecting to see you before this."

"I..." Once again her voice trailed off. Guilt? He wondered. There was certainly something in her eyes that he'd never seen before, a kind of bewilderment that most likely came from embarrassment.

"I would have liked for you to come to sooner," he said in a gentler tone, striving to be understanding, to let reason and not anger rule this exchange.

"I didn't know you were back!" she said, and it sounded like an accusation. There was such an odd look about her, as though she might bolt in panic at any moment.

There was no point in delay, he decided, realizing he would have to initiate matters. She looked like conversation was quite beyond her. "I have heard...things about you," he said, the words bitter in his mouth. He didn't need to be watching her so closely to see her start at this information. "In fact, the entire village can talk of little but you. And Mr. Godfrey, of course. You are well acquainted with the man, from what I understand."

She frowned, but said nothing. Her stony silence was beginning to bother him. "Look, Thea, I'm not going to pretend I don't know everything that's being said, nor should you. I only want to know what happened."

"When did you hear this story?"

"The night I returned, at the Coopersmith's."

At this her face hardened, brows drawing together in an icy frown and mouth pressing into a tight line. "Lydia, no doubt."

Gideon inclined his head and Thea scoffed. She bit her lip and turned to look out the window. Beyond the shadow of the house, yellow sunlight lit the lawn. "Is that why you haven't been to see me? Because of what they're saying?"

He said nothing.

The look she gave him, when she turned to face him, was a mixture of anger and longing. "You believe them?" she asked harshly.

"I only want to know what happened. I want you to tell me." The uncertainty was there again, rising against the back of his throat, until he thought he might gag. He wanted to know, and did not want to

know at all.

"You already think you know – you do believe them. I...I thought you would stand for me," she whispered with a shake of the head.

She sounded so shattered that he started to rise, but checked himself. He would forgive her anything; that much he knew and could not deny. But he had to have the words from her, some indication of remorse for her actions, of reciprocity of his feelings toward her. Something!

"And I will," he said, struggling to keep his voice even, "but you must tell me what happened. You knew Godfrey before – he is the man you met that day you came here, crying, the day we – "

"He is."

Some tiny shred of hope in Gideon disappeared.

"I loved him once," she said, slowly, woodenly. "I suppose."

He threw down his cane, the clatter muffled by the thick rug beneath his feet. Though he'd vowed to be understanding, he could not staunch the hot anger that flowed through him. The image of her lying with another man burst into his mind and would not go.

"Was he in your house?" he bit out.

"Yes," she answered simply.

He looked at her, this woman that he loved; beloved eyes, beloved lips, the heart he so badly wanted to claim, and was pierced by disillusionment so deep that it befuddled him. Was this revenge for his years of reckless womanizing? Some kind of cosmic repayment for all the time that he'd spent in shallow pursuit of pleasure? Surely the war years had been enough to pay the balance on that score.

"Why?"

"John – "

"John?"

She continued as though he hadn't interrupted. " – came to see me in the middle of the night. He wanted to talk about...certain matters. I let him speak his piece, then I bade him leave."

She was still standing at the spot near the door where he'd found her, still wearing her cloak. "And that is the truth?" he asked hesitantly.

She nodded.

"You do not seem very vigorous in defense of yourself!" he exclaimed.

"I am not defending myself."

Far off in the house one of the dogs barked. In the library, silence reigned.

"I want to believe you," he said finally.

"Then do."

And he did suddenly, believe her. Mostly, save one tiny nagging

spot of doubt which he could, given enough concentrated effort, undoubtedly squash.

"Mmmph!" he mumbled, scrubbing his hands over his face and turning to Thea with a relieved smile. "It doesn't matter. If you cannot speak of it... I forgive you."

"Do you?"

"Yes!" he replied, extending a hand to draw her near, just wanting it to be over, to hold her.

She tilted her head, studying him like a newfound species, ignoring the gesture. He lowered his hand, the growing sense of relief replaced by a ball of something icy and hard in his stomach.

When she spoke, he flinched, the brutal pitch of her voice so at odds with her stony expression. "You dare? You...you rutting...wretch! Do you think everyone as debauched as you? Judging me from your lofty post?"

She stomped forward to the desk, scarlet-cheeked, eyes glazed with fury. "I did not ask for your forgiveness!" Her hand came down on the desk. "Remember that! I never asked for it!"

She turned away and made for the door to the garden. Gideon stood, moving to follow her, to stop her. "Thea!"

"I was a fool to give myself to you," she said over her shoulder.

"No!" he leapt in front of her, blocking the door. "Don't regret that, it was – "

"Stupid! Wrong!" she yelled, slapping his hand away.

"Thea, come back, tell me – " There was something more to this, a deeper hurt beneath the veneer of anger. He gentled his voice, grasping her by the upper arms, holding her though she tried to twist away. "It wasn't wrong, it was wonderful. It meant so much to me..."

"So much that you believe the first rumor you hear about me?" She twisted from his grasp and he did not try to stop her.

"I only wanted to have something from you, some indication of your true feelings," he said lamely. That was the coil to love, he saw with a sudden clarity – a desperate need to have it returned.

"You had it." She glanced at the sofa where they had made love. The memory rose up sharply, a vivid presence in the room between them. "I am not like you – " She bit down on the corner of her mouth. Her breath came in a ragged cadence and he thought she would cry. "I should never have trusted you."

"Trusted me? This is what you expected, isn't it, from a great rake like me? Did you ever see anything in me other than fighting, carousing, wenching? What could I possibly know about anything? You never once put your trust in me – " again she glanced at the sofa. "Your body, yes, but never your heart," he amended.

"Are they not one and the same?"

"No," he bit out with quick certainty, before realizing that they might be, for her. "It is easier by far to give your body than to give your heart."

She paled. Her hands clutched at her cloak, knuckles white. "I pity you. For the warped sense of reason that you believe replaces the existence of genuine feeling. You live rationalizing the shallowness of your days, unaware of the true nature of life."

"And what is that, pray tell?" he shot out, angry. "You, with your head buried in books and paper? You don't even know what life is until you've seen it bleeding out before your eyes. Spare me the condescending claptrap gleaned from some Greek tragedy."

"Do not equate the taking of life with living it! As if all that time you spent in the pursuit of murder qualifies you to judge me, or anybody else living a decent life!"

He stepped back, hurt. "Is that what you think me? A murderer?"

Her face crumbled. "I – "

"My God, the hell of it – " He turned away, truly stung. He picked up his cane and leaned on it, looking out the window at the bright new day, emerald and azure and gold, as far as could be from the dismal frost that was overtaking him.

"There is more than one kind of hell," she said softly, after a long time.

"So I see."

It was at this moment that he realized precisely how much he loved her. He realized it from the terrific pain that was radiating from the center of his chest into each and every fiber of his body, the pain that came from the certain knowledge that he was losing her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Of the three friends Thea had in life, one was dead, another no longer considered so, and the other banned from contact by a pair of very scandalized parents. She could not help but conclude that friendships were not her forte.

Neither could she help but wish for the comforting presence a friend might provide; a sympathetic look, a kind gesture, some warm human contact. Her house was so quiet and empty, and she was so very lonely in it. She wished even for Gideon's dogs, but feared that in wishing for them she was in fact expressing longing for their owner. And she would not long for him.

She kept telling herself he was unworthy of her, shallow, false, all the things she'd told him that last fateful day in the library. She just couldn't seem to convince herself of it.

The walls of her little house closed in around her, the silence pressing down like a smothering blanket. Thea took to the meadows and glades and woods of Littleover, unable to bear the pressure of her own thoughts in the empty house. Going out the door she was forced to bite her tongue as she called out her departure to Agatha, the force of long habit resistant to the new situation.

At night the crickets sang, a creeping, constant melody that cut the ruthless silence. A floorboard might squeak, or a shutter might bang against the wall; once she dropped a glass and the sound of shattering occupied the entire room with a physical force, staying and echoing for hours.

She did not speak.

It seemed sad to hear the sound of her own voice when no reply was possible. Talking to herself, to fill the void or assuage her soul, was only to make the entire situation worse, and perhaps set her on the road to lunacy.

How she had relied on Agatha. Even as she'd aged and kept more and more to her bed, she'd been a comfort, a presence in the house. The only three people who had known her from childhood were gone, a fact that was oddly painful. To everyone else that she knew or would ever meet, she would only be the adult version of herself; no one would ever look at her again and recall the infant or child she had been. She felt this notion shouldn't matter, and yet it kept coming back to her with painful, repetitive blows.

Nor could she deflect a sense of betrayal. At Agatha and her parents for abandoning her, at Gideon for doubting her when she needed him most.

Thinking of Gideon brought on a mix of hopeless rage and longing,

so she tried to push him out of her mind, always a temporary measure, as he kept creeping back with insidious frequency. Recalling the things he'd said and thought of her helped bolster her resolve to harden her soft and foolish heart.

"Miss Meadows!"

Miss Meadows did not hear him; she continued in the opposite direction.

"Miss Meadows!" Gideon shouted again, hurrying after the woman's retreating figure, disregarding the interested glances of the people near him.

It was a busy day in the village, but he managed to work his way through the crowd and reach his target. "Miss Meadows, you are elusive," he said with a smile.

"M-my lord," she said, glancing quickly upward.

"I trust you are enjoying this fine day." Inane, as the weather was muggy, the square crowded and noisy, but he really did not know what else to say to the girl.

"I am only doing some errands for my mother," she indicated the packages she carried. "In fact, I will beg your pardon, for she expects me home directly." Miss Meadows nodded awkwardly and moved around him. He had the sense she was all too eager to quit his company.

"Wait!" Gideon said. Miss Meadows turned abruptly at the suddenness of his tone, sending one of her packages sliding to the ground.

"Oh, drat!" she exclaimed.

"Allow me." Gideon bent to retrieve the package. His presence always seemed to fluster the chit. "You must let me take those from you," he said kindly.

"Indeed, it is not necessary. I've not far to go, so if you could just – "

"I insist," Gideon interrupted, moving to take the remainder of her packages. To his surprise, she would not surrender them.

"As I must insist," she said emphatically, "that I am in no need of assistance. If you will just please return my package." Her cheeks burned red, and she glanced at the people around them.

"And what kind of gentleman would I be, Miss Meadows," he said as gently as he could, lest he spook the girl even more, "if I were to allow you to walk away unaided?"

"I'm sure it is of no concern to me, sir."

Unlikely that was a note of disdain in her voice. He moved to take her packages.

"I insist you stop!" Several passersby turned their heads at the sound of Miss Meadows's voice. One or two even stopped, but moved on, assuaged by Gideon's cool smile of dismissal. He took a slow step

back, releasing his hold on her packages as he did so.

Miss Meadows's face was bright red, and her eyes, when she finally raised them to his, flashed with surprising vehemence. "Let us call a spade a spade, sir," she said in a more level tone, albeit through clenched teeth. "It is abundantly clear you have little interest in gentlemanly behavior."

Gideon's brows raised. Disdain was not the half of it.

"Your interests are entirely self-directed. Your determination to accompany me can only be because of my friendship with Thea – Miss Ridley."

Miss Meadows stared him in the eye, daring him to deny it, which he could not, of course, do. "I admire your perception, Miss Meadows, and your bluntness," he said after a moment. "And your accuracy, though it shames me to admit it."

She blinked.

It was Gideon's turn to look away. He focused on his boot, kicking softly at the tip of his cane. "I could not think of a more forthright way to ask after her. I have not...seen her in some time."

"Nor I."

He looked at her, curious.

"My parents have forbidden a continuance of our friendship," she said shortly.

"Whatever for?"

She shot him a look laden with the repugnance one might reserve for a foul object on the bottom of one's shoe. "I should think it quite obvious!"

"I should think it anything but!" he said hotly, finding Miss Meadows suddenly annoying.

"You could not possibly be so – so – " she took a calming breath.

He regarded her with an arched brow, but her burst of audacity seemed to stop short of calling him stupid. "I've been called many things, Miss Meadows. I assure you that you may speak your mind without fear of offending me."

"I'm not worried about offending you," she replied. She cast a nervous glance at the people moving around them. "It's only that matters are..."

Gideon waited. "Yes?"

"Matters are bad enough; I should hate to contribute to the scandal."

Gideon sought to keep the impatience from his tone, but it did feel as if he and Miss Meadows were having three different conversations at once, none of which he understood. "Scandal?"

She shot him yet another disbelieving look. "There is no need for all this pretense," she said stiffly.

Gideon lost his battle for patience. "I can hardly play at pretense as I am completely ignorant of matters which seem to you to be quite obvious!" he snapped, kicking his cane for emphasis.

Miss Meadows did look taken aback; then her gaze turned shrewd. "You mean to imply that you are the only person within miles to be ignorant of one of the worst scandals in the history of Littleover?"

"I am fairly reclusive, if you have not noticed," he snapped. "And do not concern myself overmuch with village gossip."

Miss Meadows pursed her lips, and seemed to reach a decision. "But this gossip concerns you, indirectly at least."

His reputation, it seemed, had caught up with him. Still, to call it one of the worst scandals in village history was a bit much. Miss Meadows's next words swiftly and brutally dispatched all thoughts of his own reputation.

"It is Thea, of course, and her pre-dawn visit from John. Everyone knows, and she is labeled the worst sort of harlot." Miss Meadows watched him intently.

"B-but she said nothing happened."

"And of course everyone sees fit to believe her."

A cold dread began to seep from his gut into his chest.

"Only the vicar will speak to her. My parents have forbidden me contact, lest my reputation suffer. And there is no one else who will go to her. She is alone. Cast-off."

Fool, fool, fool, he chanted to himself, his anger at the villagers surpassed a thousand-fold by anger at himself. How could he have allowed matters to come to this? "Alone, with an ill servant," he said, half to himself. Miss Meadows inhaled sharply, and the last of the doubt disappeared from her eyes.

With another glance around, she appeared to reach some decision. "You'd best come with me."

"I really don't think there's time." He wanted to be gone, to reach Thea as soon as possible, to try to remedy as much of this disastrous situation as he could. His body was already turned in her direction, anxious to go.

"It is important. Please," Miss Meadows implored and he reluctantly agreed, conceding to her look of distress, but unable to do more than follow in silence.

–

That part of the churchyard was cool, kept from gloom by the sunlight that fell in speckled patches through the canopy of trees overhead. Even the birds seemed to respect the place, keeping their chirping to a minimum, and it was hushed and still – peaceful, even, were it not for the nasty emotions coursing through him.

Gideon looked down at the graves at his feet. May and Victor Ridley's stone was small, bearing only their names and the dates that bookended their lives. A browning posy rested at the base.

Next to them lay a pile of freshly overturned earth, a larger bouquet of drying roses scattered atop it. No marker yet indicated the inhabitant's identity.

He stared down at Agatha's grave, wondering how on earth so much could happen right under his nose. He felt the worst sort of man, utterly insentient to the needs and suffering of those around him.

"You – you do care for her." He'd forgotten Miss Meadows's presence. She was looking up at him with puzzled astonishment.

"Is it so surprising?" he asked wryly.

"In light in of your recent behavior, yes. It is."

Gideon was silent for a moment as a dozen inappropriate responses came to mind. Finally, he said, "You have become very forthright."

She shrugged. "I have always tried to be genteel and good. It seems pointless not to speak my mind anymore."

"A good way to live, I think."

"Oh, yes," Miss Meadows replied. "Only think of how much confusion and hardship is created by not speaking out. Why, it leads to the very worst sort of misunderstandings."

Gideon could not suppress a small grin. "Are you trying to tell me, Miss Meadows, that you think I still stand a chance?"

While not as encouraging as he might have wished, her earnest response did provide him with at least one small ray of hope. "One can only try, my lord Captain."

–

Of the countless things Thea wanted to say to Gideon, not a single one would come to mind when she opened the door to find him standing on her threshold. She couldn't, in fact, even utter a simple hello. Instead she stood there, staring at him, surprised and not that he should be there at all.

His mouth twisted after a silent minute, a tiny gesture that betrayed his discomfort. The afternoon sun slanted in the sky behind him, gilding his appearance; his hooded eyes gave nothing of his intentions away. Though his carriage stood near the path, his hand was tight on the cane, and she knew his leg pained him.

"May I come in?" he asked after a while.

There was a moment of indecision, of meanness to send him away simply because she could. But she let him in because of the leg, telling herself it didn't matter at this point anyway.

He followed her into the cramped drawing room, the weight of his gaze as physical as a touch upon her back. She could feel him taking

in her appearance, raking her from head to toe, and wished she had on a prettier gown, not that she even owned one. It might be nice, she thought, to have for once the benefit of added confidence that lovely clothing could bestow.

They sat down in silence, Thea vowing to herself she would not be the first to speak. Gideon took his time in settling himself in her old chair, the one that had been her father's favorite. She'd spent a good deal of time perched on its arm, reading with Papa there, on those distant evenings before Mother had fallen ill, before her world had fallen apart. It was a lonely memory, the type of which she usually suppressed, but she allowed it now, let the texture of that time wash over her, let herself remember with an oddly calm clarity.

It did her good to remember.

"I've been at the churchyard," he said finally, with a swift glance at her face.

Ah.

"You do know that I had no idea?" He gazed at her intently.

"Obviously," Thea replied in a tight voice. There was a lengthy silence after that, during which she wondered if he'd intended that one comment as an apology. Eventually he cleared his throat.

"I am...sorry. For your loss. I know she was with your family for a long time."

Thea merely inclined her head in response. Whatever she thought she might feel upon seeing him, it had never occurred to her that she wouldn't feel anything at all. She faced him now with calm detachment, as though he were truly nothing more than her employer.

"I see you will not make this any easier on me than necessary," he blurted.

"This?"

"My attempt at making amends."

Thea looked down at her hands. "Is that what I am to do, then? Make this easier on you?"

"Of course not." He cleared his throat. "Not at all. I merely wish to..."

The silence settled again like an uncomfortable blanket. Thea let it go on, unable to muster the energy to break it. But she did watch him, covert looks from under her lashes, which were really not so necessary since he seemed illogically engrossed in the tip of his cane. It rested beside him on the chair, his long legs angled out, the left bent at the odd angle she knew afforded his knee a measure of comfort. He was as graceful and handsome as ever.

The soft sunlight fell on him from the window behind, highlighting head and shoulders with a gentle golden heat, adding shimmer to a man that already shone. His hair was tidy, he was freshly shaved and

he was the usual classic and well-turned out male that he ever was.

Thea could not help but glance down at the old gown covering her knees, so obviously mended in so many places. It had been impossible to cover up the tears, after a while, fine though Agatha's stitches used to be. The tips of her sturdy shoes poked out from beneath her hem, as well-worn as the rest of her wardrobe, as the rest of her home – the rest of her, she felt at times. She did not generally allow herself the indulgence of self-pity; it really was a pointless endeavor, serving only to make difficult matters worse. But just now, she felt she might give in to it.

"You could come back." Gideon spoke, startling her a bit. "To the library. To work. The project needs... it is yet undone."

To go back. Relief coursed through her at the thought, and just as quickly chilled her. There really was no option of going back.

"It is very kind of you," she replied. "But unnecessary. I have made other arrangements, and I think we may both agree that it would not be the best course of action, considering our previous..." She trailed off, unable to put a name to the memories that were flooding her brain at the moment. She swallowed deeply. "Allow me to fetch you some tea."

She stood quickly, disregarding his sound of protest. She did not care that he did not want tea, she only had to leave his presence, on any pretense, needing the respite even a minute would provide.

She stood a long time in the tiny kitchen, letting the water boil and boil. She wished that he had not come; it would have been easier going on without him. And yet...

An unbroken string of hollow days and nights stretched before her, ghosts and memories her only companions. She knew loneliness and supposed it would grow even worse. Regardless of whom she met or befriended, she was certain to always be the odd one out, the extraneous guest that made others thankful for the husbands, lovers, sons or daughters that kept them out of her shoes.

Thea stared out the kitchen window into her mother's rose garden, which had become like a wild place, full of bright blooms and brown petals, bracken and thorns. God, how her mother had loved it, tending it with a diligence and absorption that Thea had at times envied. It stood now only as a memorial to one woman's piteous attempt at joy. There was no one to enjoy it now.

Thea prepared the tea, finally, loading the tray with meager provisions, squared her shoulders, and went out to face Gideon.

–

Gideon watched her as she re-entered the room, silently setting the tea tray on the table. He sensed a change, though he could not have

pinpointed what precisely had shifted in the current between them.

"Helen and Thor miss you," he said as she handed him a cup. She smiled vaguely in response. *It's me that misses you*, was what he really wanted to say. *Come back, come back...* But there was a restraint in their interaction and even he was not thick enough to dismiss it.

And then she did something that shocked him utterly. She did not step away or sit down. She stayed where she was and put her hand on his shoulder, and kept it there. The action so astonished him that he splashed hot tea on his hand and he looked up at her, half-afraid to read the expression on her face.

She gazed straight at him, straight through him, with a look of such open desire that Gideon's breath caught in his chest and his cock instantly rose in response. He could feel, even through his coat, the heat of her touch, every place where her fingers rested against him.

And then she turned and left the room, her shoes making an echoing thud as she ascended the staircase just visible through the open door.

–

When he came to her in that room, the tidy bedroom with its patched coverlet burnished by the late afternoon sun, Thea closed her eyes and inhaled sharply, letting the too familiar scent of Gideon meld into the scent of the bedroom, knowing as she did it that the two smells would be forever after inseparable.

The old with the new.

He was paused at the door, watching her with tentative speculation and no end of open desire. Gratification moved through her core. And an answering desire that left her mouth dry and knees weak. Letting her knees fold, she plopped onto the edge of the bed. Her heart pounded in her chest so loudly that she thought he must hear.

Standing in the doorway, he was rampantly, completely beautiful, dark haired and azure-eyed, lean and strong, like a warrior angel whose imperfections only accentuated his appeal. One hand rested on the doorframe, and Thea longed to feel the battle-scarred, calloused touch upon her.

He watched her intently, waited for her to make the next move. Their gazes locked and a shiver tore through her, and Thea could wait no more. With a moan she raised her hand to him. She was past caring, would beg him if she must.

It proved unnecessary. In a second he was in the room, upon her, his hands in her hair, pushing her head back as his mouth crushed hers, their breath mingling in ragged gasps.

He was pressing her back, down into the bed, his large strong body

crushing her into the mattress. Thea didn't care, she only wanted more, knew it would never be enough.

He paused for a moment to fling off his coat, Thea's hands going to his waistband and pulling out his shirt. His hand were at the front of her dress, pulling and moving until his mouth came down upon her naked breast and Thea thought she would die at the wet heat of his mouth.

She pulled up the fabric of her dress and opened her legs wide as he settled himself between her thighs. Thea arched against him, brought him as close as the fabric of their clothing would allow. Her hands went under his shirt, against the taut skin of his belly, his chest, the smoothness of his nipples.

He moaned and pushed against her.

His mouth fastened hotly on the juncture of neck and shoulder, and his hand moved between them.

"Gideon!" she panted as he thrust his fingers inside her, and sensation rolled through her. His hand moved through the slick flesh, over it, and Thea rose up until her lips found the skin of his neck and grazed him, not gently at all, with her teeth.

Her hand was atop his as he unfastened his trousers, and he sprang free into her open palm, smooth heat and hunger. She felt it only for a moment, for he drew back and with one strong stroke filled her completely.

"Gideon!" she cried. He gasped against her open mouth, drew back, and did it again.

And there was nothing in the world except for Gideon's strong body over hers, the steely heat of him moving inside her, his rough hands cupping her bottom as he drove into her again and again.

His ragged breath against her ear.

His sweat-soaked cheek against hers.

His weight crushing her into the bed.

The smell, the taste, the touch of...

"Gideon!"

She fell, over and over into a delight that surely no one had ever experienced. She fell again and again, her fingernails digging into the skin of his back, legs tight around his waist as she arched up and held him with her body as he shuddered against her.

–

A long while later he moved and curled against her silently. As the shadows lengthened into evening and the room went from amber to silver, they slept.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Much later a soft rain began to fall, shushing against the roof and pattering in soft drops through the open window. Gideon lay there listening to it, breathing in the commingled scent of fresh rain and spent passion. Thea slept on, curled on her stomach, her body flush against his. He could see her in the pale moonlight, her hand fisted under chin, hair strewn across the pillow. He wanted to smooth his palm along the silken length of her, caress the silvery skin from nape to toes and back, and do nothing more for hours, or days. Fear of waking her stopped him.

He felt as though he'd been given an amazing, unexpected gift. He'd really only wanted to convince her to return to work – well, he'd really wanted this, he just hadn't expected to get it.

He wanted to tell her over and over how mistaken he'd been. He wanted to drape himself over her, cover and protect her, vow never to hurt her again.

She turned with a sleepy sigh.

"It's late." Her voice came as a raspy whisper, her eyes in the dark were two black discs. Gideon ran his hand through her hair, letting the curls glide against his fingers.

"Or early, depending on how you view it."

"Have you been asleep this whole time?"

"A bit," he answered. "I've been watching you for a while." The black discs shuttered as she blinked.

"You didn't have to stay."

"Didn't have to…?" he trailed off with a small laugh. "Where would I go?" He shifted a bit, enjoying the sensation of stretching his left leg.

"Home." He felt the movement as she shrugged.

"Ah."

"Ah?"

"You thought I'd sneak out in the middle of the night. And here I'll stay until morning – you can ride back to Birch House with me."

"Birch... I'm not going back to Birch House in the morning."

"I do need to be back first thing, but I can come back for you in time for dinner. Though I should like it if you were with me."

"You misunderstand me," she said, pulling away from him. "I won't be going back to Birch House at all, or anywhere with you, for that matter."

In one fluid motion she stood from the bed, searching the tousled bedclothes for her tossed shift. Her body was a brief pale blur as she hastily pulled it on.

Gideon stared at her in bewilderment, his sense of well-being

fading. Thea fumbled on floor for her shoes.

"You really should go now."

There was a disconnect between her words and the warm haven of her bed. He dragged a hand through his hair in confusion. Thea sighed in irritation, whether at him or the missing shoe he was unsure.

She stopped at the foot of the bed, hands on her waist as she looked at him. The growing light revealed a bleakness in her expression that multiplied his unease. She picked up his shirt and tossed it to him.

"I appear to be missing something," he said, slipping the shirt over his head but not moving from the bed.

"You need to go," she repeated, crossing her arms over her midriff.

"That's all the explanation I get? After last night – "

"Last night was..." she paused, turned her head and focused on the wall. "Last night was an indiscretion, and it shan't happen again. I thought you understood."

"An *indiscretion*?"

"A solitary incident, my lord. It won't be repeated."

"I'd hardly call it a solitary incident, it's not the first time."

"But the last," she said icily.

Gideon reached for his trousers, shifting on the bed to get dressed. He felt suddenly that being fully clothed and upright might give him an advantage in what had somehow turned into a confrontation.

"Just... go," she said, the coldness in her tone replaced by resignation. "Spare us both the lengthy discourse."

"I'd like an explanation," he insisted, still believing that he could set things to rights. "I know you are angry with me, but you must know I had no idea about Agatha. And for the other, I was a fool. I reacted badly, out of jealousy, if you must know." The admission left him feeling more naked now than when he'd actually been unclothed. He'd left many a woman's bed, but never like this; until Thea, he'd never known jealousy.

"It's kind of you to say so – "

"Kind!"

"It hardly matters anymore. It is no longer my concern. That is to say," she stared down at her clasped hands. "My affections are engaged elsewhere."

The taut admission stunned him. He ran a hand through his hair, squeezing along his scalp as though to massage the incomprehensible notion into his brain. "What?" Nothing was making any sense.

She was strange, so unlike herself. She stood before him like a diamond, as beautiful and just as impenetrable.

Afterwards he wondered if he should have stayed and argued with her. At the time, to do so had felt too much like begging, and that was

a language he simply did not speak. Later, of course, when her absence became painful, and he'd had more time to reflect on the mistakes that had lost her, he thought he would surely grovel on hands and knees if it might bring her back.

He gathered the rest of his things, his cravat and waistcoat, and cast her a last look before departing. She looked right at him and through him at once, her expression unreadable and distant. Perhaps he had deceived himself after all, and she really didn't feel anything more for him. What did he know of emotions and love?

Oh, but he did love her. And if he had heretofore been unfamiliar with the concept and its attendant muddle of emotions, he was now fully awake to it. He understood the poets, the swains, the starry eyed girls. He felt the joy and the pain of it, for just as he knew that he would never stop loving her, he did not know how to persuade the flat-eyed woman who'd thrown him out of her life to take him back.

Perhaps he'd been too reserved, let the fear of this unknown emotion hold him back.

Now his house felt empty, solitude turned to loneliness. He'd no one but the dogs for company, and they at least, seeming to sense something was amiss, stayed close to his side, their panting affection a balm.

"I bungled it, I know," he told the dogs, over and over. Helen watched him with concerned, knowing eyes, Thor lay across his legs. "Do you really think there's someone else? Godfrey, do you think?" He doubted it even as he said it; he'd made a mistake in mistrusting her. She wasn't flighty or likely to share her affections easily. He remembered her initial skittishness, her deep offense at Simeon's insults; she had always been conscious of propriety.

Helen cocked his head and Thor made a soft sound in the back of his throat. "I can't believe it either," he told the dogs.

–

"Oh, dear," Susan emitted yet another shaky sigh.

"Susan!"

Her friend's head snapped up. Susan looked at her with such trepidation that Thea had to laugh. "That is the twentieth time you've sighed since you've gotten here! And I do wish you'd make up your mind to cry or not – you look quite bilious with your eyes all watery."

Susan gaped at her open-mouthed. "I... I..." And then at last her sense of humor won out and she laughed.

"Finally!" Thea exclaimed. "My friend is returned to me." Life was difficult enough, she didn't know how she could bear it if Susan of all people were awkward around her.

After some time, Susan had managed to circumvent her parents

and come to see her. Fortunately the weather had cooperated with the subterfuge; it was unlikely anyone else would be out and about in the pouring rain. They were snugly enclosed in Thea's sitting room, for the moment safe from the world.

"Well, if I look bilious, you're looking positively wretched. How are you, really?"

"Oh, about as well as I look, I suppose," Thea answered. The light in Susan's eyes immediately dimmed, but Thea simply hadn't the energy to pretend. "I think that I must go away."

"No!"

It had been a thought for some time, and now that she'd finally said it aloud, Thea realized that it was the only course open to her. "There is no life for me here, and I cannot conceive that it will ever change. You're the only friend I've had here."

"What of Lord Birch?" Susan asked, watching her closely.

It took Thea a moment to respond. "I wouldn't call him a friend, even in the loosest possible terms."

"Then he did not... that is, you are not reconciled?"

"Hardly," Thea scoffed. "Why do you even ask?"

"Only, he spoke to me recently, and he appeared most concerned—most genuinely concerned about you, and I thought he would come to you."

Thea would scarcely admit that he had. In fact, he had sat right where Susan sat now. He'd tried to apologize in his way, and Thea had taken him up to her bed for one final time and then cut him loose. She tilted her head at Susan, who, if possible, seemed even more upset than she'd been a moment ago. "I thought it was you came here to comfort me, not the other way around," Thea said wryly.

"Of course." Susan made an attempt at looking less desolate, but was unable to keep the disappointment from her voice. "I really was convinced of his regard for you. He was so distraught to learn of Agatha's passing."

"Likely he *was* distraught. He is not a bad man." He wasn't. Gideon was a good man, not intentionally unkind, but when it was a question of one's heart, intention did not signify. "Only a bad friend. He hasn't a half of your loyalty." She could never have dreamed how much loyalty would mean to her, in the end.

But, as irreparably as his betrayal had wounded her, she longed for him, even now. She missed his eyes, his grin, the scent of his skin when he was too close to her. She missed the library, she missed the dogs. She longed to see his face, to hear her name on his lips. To sit in the library and catch him looking at her, to gaze at the fascinating scar on his lip when he spoke, or smiled.

And that, undoubtedly, was the chief reason to leave. Given

enough time, Thea feared that longing would override sense, and she'd decide to forgive him, and go back to all those things she missed. She would stand up one day and go for a walk, and find herself near Birch House, and then she'd be standing in the library door, and she'd be back in his arms and that... that she simply couldn't allow. Experience told her that in the end it would be the same result, and her heart would simply be broken again.

Thea was the first to admit, if only to herself, that she wasn't to be trusted to make the wisest decision where Gideon was concerned. Hence, she must remove herself from temptation. There was no future with Captain Lord Gideon Birch; there never would be. He would only dally with her until he was done, and then there would be nothing that remained of her. If she left now, she'd at least carry a tiny scrap of her heart and her memories, some nourishment in the long and lonely years ahead.

She'd taken that one last night with him, and tried to cut him off as coldly as she could, to wound him and his pride enough that'd he'd walk away and never think of coming back.

Apart from Susan, she had no one in the world. As dismal as the thought of the solitary years ahead was, she could not settle for a life of temporary affections, waiting to be rejected again.

The rain continued to pour, only now the room felt tight and gloomy, no longer the snug haven it had been but moments before.

She glanced up to find Susan watching her sadly, a look that told her that her friend was far more aware of the situation than she let on. Thea wanted to deny everything, to assure her that she was something other than the battered creature that she was, but couldn't summon the energy, or the will.

They sat in silence for some time until Susan mustered up some new cheer, and began updating Thea on the London gossip, attempting to lift her spirits with the various peccadilloes and scandals of high society. Thea laughed and let her talk on, and let her think it was working.

–

"Hell and damn."

Gideon stopped in his tracks at the sight of Simeon standing in his library. There he was, behind Gideon's desk, casually leafing through Gideon's papers. He looked up at Gideon's exclamation and raised a brow, a reproach for bad manners.

"You forgot bugger and balls," Simeon said, his voice as cool and clipped as ever.

"Bastard."

"A reproach to our dear mother, I am sure," Simeon replied.

"Guests don't normally riffle through their host's belongings," Gideon answered, unfreezing and stepping across the threshold into the room. Simeon's gaze immediately fixed on the cane. Gideon suppressed the urge to toss it aside, silently cursing it and the brother who had never seen him with his cane, had only known of Gideon's injury from the short letter the matron had penned on his behalf, urging him to let his family know of his condition.

Let him see, he thought defiantly, and limped slowly across the room until he reached the desk.

A long moment of silence stretched out. Gideon reached over and adroitly took the stack of papers from Simeon's hand, and tossed them onto the desk.

"What are you doing here, Simeon?" Clybourn. His brother was Clybourn and thus he was universally called. Only Gideon and Sarah ever called him Simeon. It might appear on the surface as an intimacy, and it was somewhat coming from Sarah. For Gideon it was the opposite, calling his brother by his unused Christian name the product of the odd formality of their relationship. There'd never been any affectionate or teasing nicknames between the brothers, only stiff distance and mutual disregard.

Gideon rested both hands on the cane and stared wearily at Simeon, who in turn could not seem to rip his gaze away from the walking stick. Simeon's jaw worked in that way it did when he was undergoing an emotional upheaval, and Gideon knew it was the most reaction he'd see from him.

Interacting with his brother wasn't something he sought out at the best of times, and he hadn't the energy now: He was too heartsick over Thea. He most of all didn't want to be here in the room he thought of as hers, marked everywhere with her presence. He swore her scent still lingered in the air, the faint odor of roses permanently interwoven into the essence of the library.

He glanced at the surrounding shelves, partly stocked and abandoned. Only some of the topmost shelves were filled, the leather covers nestled neatly against each other, organized in a method that still eluded him. He supposed now that she'd stepped away from her work and out of his life, he'd never figure it out. The rest of the shelves remained empty, waiting for the contents of the boxes still scattered about the room to magically shelve themselves.

"I have not seen hide nor hair of you since your return," Simeon said, interrupting his reverie. "You ferret yourself away in the outskirts of nowhere, Sarah frowns at the mention of your name, and then I learn that pretty little piece you've embroiled yourself with is Warburton's granddaughter—"

Gideon swung up the cane and pressed the tip into Simeon's chest.

Not for the first time, he wished he'd had the foresight to have purchased one with a sword hidden away inside. "Miss Ridley is not 'a piece'," he said through clenched teeth, giving the cane a push.

Simeon's eyes widened in surprise. "Pax." He gently moved the cane away from his chest. "I came only to see how you were faring."

Gideon took a deep, cooling breath. How could he reply? Abysmal? Abominable? Absolutely wrecked? There was nothing he could say, no force on earth to compel him to share his private-most thoughts with his brother. Instead he moved to the sideboard and poured himself a good glass of whisky. He'd offer one to his unwanted guest, but knew Simeon would have no issue with taking a drink for himself.

Gideon took a seat at one of the chairs before the desk and watched as his brother did just that, pouring, inhaling, sipping. The two of them bore some physical resemblance, though Gideon had always been considered the more handsome. Pretty, his mother had called him as a child. Simeon, to his knowledge, would stab anyone that dared call him pretty, and furthermore, had unlikely ever been a child: He had sprung fully formed from the iron shell of their father's skull.

Only now he noticed the gray at Simeon's temples, the lines on his face, and realized with a start that his brother was getting older. Why, he must be well past the age their father had been when he died. Gideon had the surreal feeling he'd experienced at the age of seventeen, when he'd grown taller than the inimitable Earl of Clybourn in one summer. Not that it had bought him any leverage or respect.

Simeon was getting old, and though Gideon would always be the younger brother, he was no longer so very young himself. At his age Simeon'd been a widowed father of two. Gideon had a library full of books he couldn't read.

"I thought you'd have stopped at Clybourn." Simeon took the chair beside him.

Gideon shrugged. "I can't imagine why you'd think that. This is my home," he indicated with his glass. When he'd returned to England, nothing could have compelled him to go to Clybourn. Simeon looked around doubtfully but thankfully made no reply. Gideon didn't know if he had the energy to bash him in the head.

"I had an interesting talk with young Warburton in town."

Gideon's head snapped up.

"Don't look so peevish, I ran into him just by chance. Though I did give him a piece of my mind for their treatment of your Miss Ridley. Mother," he supplied, guessing Gideon's forthcoming question, "had quite a bit to say on the subject. I must say I'm somewhat surprised

you didn't address the matter yourself," Simeon added, watching Gideon coolly.

How the Gideon of old would have fumed. This reprimand would have enraged him and sent him into a binge of retaliatory bad behavior. Now, only the vaguest annoyance washed over him at his brother's familiar highhandedness.

Gideon chuckled. "She wants nothing to do with them. Though it might save her life." Gideon took a drink and leaned his head back against the chair. "I'd have gone to Warburton with a pistol at dawn, if I thought she wanted it."

Simeon watched him thoughtfully; Gideon could see him out of the corner of his eye. What would his brother make of this new, morose, hollow man? Likely he considered him foolish and much reduced, a disappointment of even his lowest expectations.

"I cannot but admit to much surprise over this turn of events."

Gideon nodded, unsurprised by his surprise. What came next was the lecture listing all of his flaws and weaknesses, the voicing of fears for his future, the eternally damnable question: What would Father think?

Only now Simeon, for probably the first time in his life, surprised him: he said nothing at all. His brother, the powerful, blustering Earl of Clybourn sat beside him without uttering a single word of reprimand. An aura of something remarkably close to camaraderie settled between them. Gideon sipped his whisky quietly, not particularly keen to keep talking.

After a while Simeon cleared his throat and asked, "Does it hurt?"

Oh, yes, Gideon thought, momentarily mistaking the nature of the question, his thoughts on Thea. *It does hurt.* But he realized Simeon was speaking of his leg, and sought the words that would satisfy his question

"At times. When it rains. Or I walk. I can't particularly ride anymore."

Simeon shot him a look, and Gideon had to turn away from the dismay on his face. He stared down at his foot, poking the tip of the cane. Lord, he couldn’t ride anymore. When said aloud it really was something. He'd told Thea once, of course, but it hadn't been as harsh a confession. Simeon had known him as the boy who'd spent every minute on horseback, he would know what it meant to Gideon to lose that.

"That's... that is..." Simeon shook his head once, at a loss for words. Truly, it was an historic day.

"It's awful," Gideon sighed. "And it's nothing at all."

Simeon nodded, as though he understood. They sat and sipped in what very nearly felt like companionable silence, yet Gideon's

experience of his brother told him that a lengthy silence was likely a precursor to a lengthy discourse. Sure enough, Simeon spoke before too long.

"Warburton's granddaughter – Miss Ridley," he amended, quickly catching Gideon's look. He said her name as a question. Gideon stared down at his cane. "She is categorizing your library?"

"She was. She has removed herself from my employ."

Simeon nodded, as though everything were explained. "I appear to have misinterpreted your intentions toward her."

Only completely. "Yes," Gideon sighed.

"You know, you'll never win her just by sitting here and mulling things over." Simeon indicated with his whisky glass. "Fortune favors the brave; you must pursue her to persevere."

"Are you actually giving *me* advice on how to catch a woman?"

"I wouldn't think you'd needed it, either. Only I come here and find you moping about an empty house—"

"I am not moping!"

Simeon arched a brow.

"I have elected to live a life of solitude. You've no idea what ten years aboard crowded ships do to a man."

Simeon paled instantly. His jaw clenched visibly and he appeared as though he'd swallowed something very bitter. Though he'd not meant it as such, Gideon's words had struck like a blow.

Gideon looked down, giving his brother time to collect himself. If Simeon said one word about the commission, one word about the past ten years... he thought he'd disintegrate right there. He was far past the point of wanting comfort or emotional revelations from his brother. Some things were best left unsaid.

"I say, Mother's well into planning Felice’s debut," he said gruffly. Inane, but it was all he could think of.

After a moment, Simeon cleared his throat. "Oh, yes. Planning is heavily underway."

Relieved, Gideon glanced at him, glad to see his features returned to normal. A startling thought suddenly occurred to Gideon.

"You aren’t intending to spend the night here, are you?"

"Dear Lord, no. I'm riding on to Town."

And that, it seemed, settled that.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

In keeping with his resolution to stop avoiding the library, Gideon retired there after luncheon with a stack of ledgers, intent on bringing his household accounts into some semblance of order. He hardly even thought of her as he immersed himself in his work and aptly convinced himself that the smell of roses and ink that permeated the room had nothing to do with her. Why should he think of her here, in particular? If they had spent some time here together? Some of the best times of his life? And if they had lain on that sofa right there, and made love?

A fragile knock brought his head up and he was most astounded to see Susan Meadows in the door.

"Lord Birch, may I have a moment of your time?"

She entered the room at his nod, a distinct sense of purpose in her step as she crossed the carpet, though she avoided meeting his gaze.

"Please, sit down." He indicated the chair before his desk but she shook her head and remained standing, clutching her reticule as if she feared he'd steal it.

"There is a matter – " She broke off, exhaled loudly, inhaled as though about to speak again, and stopped.

"Yes?" Gideon asked gently, recalling her frequent shyness around him. The look she gave him, however, had more to do with anger than shyness.

She looked away, brows drawn, mouth pursed, very clearly trying to decide something. Another hefty sigh and she opened her reticule, removing a piece of paper.

"I wasn't meant to bring you this until next week," she said in a brittle tone, and handed him a letter, folded and sealed.

Even before he took it he knew the handwriting, the familiar neat, slanting scrawl that was on countless pieces of paper throughout his house. He held it in his hand for a moment and then, regardless of Miss Meadows's presence, tore it open and felt his breath leave his body.

Captain Birch –

Gideon.

My sudden act of bravery appears to have exhausted itself with writing your name. All the things I wanted to say have become garbled and the idea of this letter suddenly seems foolish in the extreme, though I shall continue – cowardice at this point being unacceptable.

I can regret many things, but nothing so much as ever allowing you to believe my feelings toward you were indifferent. Only know that in my

actions I was at all times motivated by my own principles of self-preservation, and never by manipulation or cruelty. In retrospect it does seem senseless, but if you should ever happen to read one of those Greek tragedies in your library (second shelf, middle of the north wall), you will see that there are worse things one can endure.

In my moments of fantasy, I have allowed that I should have loved you well. In my moments of unveiled honesty, I allow that I do, and shall continue to love you in the flawed and distant way of which I am capable: Unfailingly, belatedly, and futilely.

Thea

Gideon took a ragged breath and tore his gaze from the letter, fixing it on Susan. "Why did she want you to bring it?"

He knew when she looked away, and blind panic twisted in his chest. "Where is she?" It was his commander's voice, brooking no opposition, allowing no option save compliance.

Still, Susan hesitated. "You must want to tell me," Gideon pointed out. "Or you wouldn't have brought me the letter."

"I cannot help but feel I am betraying her confidence," Susan replied, rubbing her hands together, her eyes large and full of censure.

Gideon fought for patience and calm. "We can stand here for an hour whilst I try to convince you, or you can tell me now so that I may be on my way."

"You will go after her?" Susan asked hopefully.

He let his expression answer.

A pause, a decisive breath, and then, "She is sailing for Italy."

Gideon dropped the letter in shock, then hastily bent to retrieve it. "She's mad."

"Not mad," Susan contradicted. "But no longer able to bear suffering. She has had too much of it," she said pointedly.

"When does she sail?"

"In two days. Please, Captain Birch," she stopped him as he made to leave the room, his mind on the necessities for immediate departure. "Do not be unkind to her; she deserves so much more."

Gideon stepped forward and seized Susan's hand. "She is my heart, Miss Meadows. And I owe you my life for coming me today." He pressed a kiss to the back of her hand and then was off, knowing there was no time for delay.

–

The ship upon which Thea was sailing was called Majesty. She went directly to her cabin, fixed on avoiding the heartwarming display of farewells. For every one person on deck laughing, waving, crying, shouting 'bon voyage!' and 'I'll miss you!', there were at least two on

the dock echoing the sentiments. Even the few minutes she'd had to spend on deck until the porter could show her to the cabin had been unbearable. It was beyond sad to leave a place forever and not have a single person see you off.

Her cabin was tiny, but clean. She went about the task of arranging her few belongings, moving slowly, but still finishing all too quickly. She wanted the ship to move, hoist anchor or whatever sea-faring term meant leave England. Once they were under way, rocking and swaying toward the cerulean waters of the choppy Atlantic, she might allow herself the necessary indulgence of letting her thoughts wander. Until then, she nervously paced the small cabin, forcing herself to think of Italy or the weather or sea monsters, anything to keep her mind from straying to *him*.

The racket increased above deck with the rising chorus of last goodbyes. People were shouting and laughing, and new sounds started to come from the ship itself; definite indications of movement and preparation. Thea stilled as the ship came to life under her feet, the breath caught in her throat. Once the ship sailed, once all physical ties with England were severed, her entire life here would be behind her. The Ridley's tiny ramshackle cottage. Her parents' graves, Agatha's grave. Susan, the dearest friend she'd known. The library at Birch House. And most of all, he would be there, too. Behind her, in the past.

The ship began to move, she could feel it swaying in a new, purposeful way around her. A clatter rose in the passageway outside her door as passengers finally made their way to their cabins. She imagined the shoreline moving away, unable to countenance going up to the deck to watch it recede as she secretly longed to do.

She let go her breath, and finally allowed his name into her thoughts: and with it, the vivid memory of his face, his voice, his touch, the smell of his skin against hers. Gideon.

There was a knock at the cabin door just then, tearing her mind into the present. At least, until she opened the door and the past walked right in.

–

"What," she asked in a voice breathless with shock, "are you doing here?"

"Looking for you," Gideon replied casually, as though they had just chanced to meet on the meadow. He stood in the doorway, ridiculously handsome, windblown and tired, but with an odd edge of excitement about him. It was an impossible, misplaced situation, to see his familiar form in such an unexpected place.

"B-but the ship is pulling away from shore!" She gestured to the

porthole, as if the swaying of the vessel beneath their feet were not enough proof that they were underway.

His glance followed her hand and then returned to her. "Yes," he stated blandly, stepping into the room and shutting the door.

She stared at him, open-mouthed with disbelief. "You must leave the ship! It is going to Italy!" His look was identical to his tone, making her statement seem obvious and mundane. "You cannot sail to Italy!" she nearly shrieked.

He only cocked a brow, smiling at her vaguely. Thea's heart thundered in her ears, pounding in confusion. She pressed the flat of her palm against her forehead, thereby attempting to keep the chaos of her thoughts in check by sheer physical pressure. "Wha...b-b-but..." she sputtered, and then whirled on him as one thought managed to break through the tumult. "Why are you here?"

"You wrote me a letter."

Blood rushed to her head, and Thea fought the urge to groan in mortification. "You have me confused with someone else," she said stiffly.

"Susan brought it to me."

Susan! Thea turned from him, pressing her hands against her face. Her cheeks were hot to the touch, and she could only imagine the blush that shone there.

"It was a lovely letter."

"I was foxed when I wrote it."

"You said you loved me."

"I was only being kind."

"I love you, too." He said it simply, evenly. He spoke with a calm that, while yet unable to even consider the sentiment, made her doubt her ears.

"Wonderful," she replied caustically and turned to open the cabin door. "I believe it is not too late for the captain to return you to shore." He moved towards her, shutting the door easily with one hand, though she resisted.

"Oh!" she cried in high exasperation, moving to the other side of the tiny cabin, his gaze following her. "You must leave the ship!"

He looked at her, undisturbed. "I am not leaving the ship."

"Are you mad?"

"Quite possibly." He smiled good-naturedly, his eyes crinkling. Thea steadfastly refused to look at the scar on his mouth. He sat on the only chair, extending his bad leg before him, smiling up at her all the while. "You love me—-I have it right here," he touched a hand to his breast pocket, "in your own hand. And I love you."

Thea threw up her hands in exasperation. "But I am going to Italy."

He shrugged. Thea shook her head in disbelief. "I am going to live

there," she enunciated with exaggerated care. "This big ship is sailing away and unless you get off right now, you will be going to Italy, too." She inhaled in shock as a suspicion slowly began to spread. "Why are you here?" she repeated in a loud, screechy voice she was certain she'd never possessed until this moment.

At this, Gideon's smile spread until he was positively beaming. His blue eyes gazed up at her warmly and he appeared all too self-satisfied for her liking. "I've come to marry you."

Anything she might have thought to say was stilled as the shock of his words stole all ability to think or breathe. She could only stare at him in open-mouthed amazement. "You *are* mad," she finally breathed, convinced beyond doubt of a defect in his mental capabilities.

"That is not a very nice thing to say to your bridegroom," he admonished.

"You are not. My. Bridegroom," she bit out. He only smiled with exaggerated patience. "It is impossible to be married on a ship!"

"The captain will marry us. Captain Millwood," he continued at her mutinous look, "is, coincidentally enough, a very old, very good friend of mine. Former Navy man. I cannot foresee any impediment to our nuptials."

"I bloody well can!" she snorted with an emphatic stamp of the foot. "Captain or no captain, you cannot force me to marry you. Ha!"

One broad shoulder lifted in a dismissive shrug though his gaze was piercing. "Whether or not you marry me, we will still spend the duration of the voyage locked in this cabin in connubial bliss. The choice is yours."

For one astounded moment she glared at him, thoughts whirling with maelstrom force, and then the astonishment that had been holding her together fled. Slumping wearily against the bulkhead, she looked at him in pained puzzlement. Unable to stem the tears that burned her eyes and throat, she was only able to ask, "Why? Why? Why are you doing this to me?"

At the sight of her tears he made a motion to rise, but checked himself. The look of calm in his eyes was gone, leaving a tempestuous blue intensity in its wake. His hands gripped the arms of the small chair where he sat, knuckles white under the pressure. "Thea." His voice cracked ever so slightly on her name. "Thea, I read your letter. Do you think it meant nothing to me?"

Reflexively she pulled her lower lip into her mouth, biting down hard to keep from weeping uncontrollably.

"My God! What do you imagine I felt," he swallowed audibly, "reading those words? You tell me you love me and then you run away from me? Did you honestly think I wouldn't follow you?"

"I had intended to be further away when you read it!"

He shook his head. "Susan came to me out of love for you, and thank God for it."

"Oh, what does it matter? You made your feelings concerning me abundantly clear." She let her head fall forward onto her bent knees and wrapped her arms around her legs. "Now please just leave me alone."

"I was a fool."

"Yes, you were." Her tears still flowed, soaking the fabric beneath her face. "Goodbye."

"I was pig-headed and insulting."

"Very. Do shut the door on your way out."

"Hells' bells, I am not leaving!" he yelled.

"You don't have to shout! I'm...I'm..." her voice broke as the tears flowed anew. She made some incoherent sounds into her gown, which had, quite unfortunately, become somewhat of a handkerchief, and a sodden one at that.

Gideon took a deep breath. "I told you I was a fool. But I've been a fool since that first day I saw you, wearing that damned enormous hat and looking up at me with those eyes...I saw your eyes and stopped breathing, did you know that?" A harsh sound escaped him. His gaze was unflinching. "Gideon Birch, notorious reprobate, brought senseless by a little slip of a country miss. I loved you in that very moment, Theadosia. The sight of your clear green eyes began to wash away the darkness of my soul, and it has not stopped. I have not stopped. I love you!" he shouted the last, emphasizing the point to her and anyone within listening distance.

He brushed a hand over his face, and then shoved it through his hair. He set it on his bad leg, absent-mindedly rubbing the aching knee as he had done so many times before.

This was Thea's undoing, but the tears were flowing so fast that she could not move to speak.

"I want you to take care of me, and I want to take care of you. I'll give you anything. I'll never believe another word anyone says—hell, I'll never speak to another living soul if I have you back."

"Do you really love me?" Her voice was thick with tears.

A myriad of expressions crossed his face in rapid succession. He groaned. "I vowed never to set foot upon a ship again, Thea, and here I am! I wanted nothing more than to live a quiet, comfortable life, far from the sea and yet here I am! I have not slept in two days, my leg aches beyond bearing, and do you know what I would have done had you already sailed? I would have gotten on the next available ship and followed you to whatever godforsaken far off place you'd decided to take yourself off to!

"Hell, yes, I really love you!"

"There's no need to shout," Thea protested under a fresh assault of tears, biting her lip to regulate her ragged breathing. His mouth opened and then clamped shut. He leaned his head backwards and shut his eyes.

After a while, Thea got her breathing under control. For the first time she noticed the sounds of the ship, alive beneath their feet. The wind in the sails, the water slapping the hull, shouts of sailors all mixed into a cacophony. How familiar it all must be to Gideon.

She looked at him, at the way his large frame filled the small chair, the way his powerful body occupied the room, just as his presence occupied her heart. He was a man, brilliant and true, and she loved him with everything she was.

The cabin was so small that all she really had to do was lean forward and she was next to his chair. His eyes opened, and looked directly into hers. A slight smile quivered at the corners of his mouth, hovering just so, and Thea leaned over and kissed the beloved scar on his lip, just touching it with her mouth.

They rested like that for a moment, barely touching, until, with one swift motion, Gideon wrapped his arms around her and dragged into his lap. He squeezed her face between his hands and looked at her fiercely.

"We will be married."

"I – "

"Don't think of arguing it. And you will never, under any circumstances think of leaving me again. I'm liable to do something incredibly foolish."

"Such as follow me onto a ship?" she asked with a small smile.

"That was not foolish in the least. It's the wisest thing I've ever done." His eyes twinkled. "Only tell me this: What significance does Italy hold for you?"

"None whatsoever."

He looked puzzled, then understood. "Precisely why you chose it. And Littleover has become unbearable. We will live in Italy, if it's what you wish."

"I only want to be where you are."

His expression softened, though his grip on her did not. "Silly thing, I'll go where you lead me." He kissed her softly. "It doesn't matter what's out the window, as long as I have you next to me."

He kissed her again, finally freeing her face to wrap his arms around her. She embraced him, and held him as tight as she could.

–

"How did you arrange everything so speedily?" Thea asked many hours later.

"I told you, I've known Captain Millwood for many years," he said as he sat, watching her move about the cabin. His few belongings had been brought to the room and Thea was busy arranging them. "You don't have to do that, you know."

"I know," she said, throwing him a smile over her shoulder. "I want to."

The ship rocked beneath their feet, the sound of water surrounded them. "Besides," Gideon said, "the Captain saw no need for delay when I told him I had full intentions of sleeping in here tonight."

Thea gasped and swung to face him, one of his shirts clutched to her chest. "You did no such thing!"

"I certainly did. I was not about to let you out of my sight, married or not."

She sputtered for a moment, and then said, "Where do you think I could go on a ship?"

"I was not willing to find out. Nor," he added, "was I willing to give up the pleasure of your company."

She blushed a becoming rose color and turned away.

"Nothing to say to that?" he teased and laughed when she threw a shirt at him. "I do want you very much," he said, sobering. "Wife."

The word seared something in his soul, catching the breath in his chest. Thea stilled, watching him, her face a play of emotions.

"Take down your hair," he whispered, and she did, hesitating for only a moment. Her movements were slow, measured as she undid the low chignon, letting her unbound tresses fall with a slight shake. She watched him all the while.

"Your hair..." It was gorgeous, shiny and thick, waving down her back. "I never want you to wear it up again."

She blushed.

With her rosy skin and unbound hair, she looked younger and sweeter and lovelier than he'd ever seen her, and what Gideon wanted more than anything was to see her naked.

And so she must have sensed, for her fingers moved to the buttons of her gown, undoing them one by one by one, until she finally, slowly, stepped out of the gaping dress. Her eyes held his as she stood there in her transparent chemise, through which he could easily see her pink nipples, the shadow between her legs.

She reached under the hem and untied her stockings, letting them puddle around her feet. Then, with a last look at him, she took the chemise off in one smooth motion, and stood before him without a stitch of clothing.

Gideon swallowed and remembered to breathe. Thea became shy and made a movement to cover herself. "No," he said hoarsely, and she stopped, her eyes shining as she watched him. "My God..."

She ran to him and threw herself into his lap, burying her face in his chest. Gideon held her tight, savoring the moment, the thrill of anticipation thrumming through him in a deep wave. His hands moved over her velvety skin, over her shoulders and back, cupping her behind. She made a low sound as he bent to kiss her, wound her arms around his neck. He paused for a moment, grasping her around the waist to reposition her until she straddled him. She looked at him, breathless and startled, but said not a word.

It was the single most erotic moment of his life. He sat, fully clothed, with Thea, naked and astride him. His hands rested lightly on her waist and he looked at her, from her gorgeous full breasts, to the soft curve of her belly, to the junction of her thighs, spread wide above his cock.

He looked into the mossy depths of her beloved eyes, and exhaled roughly, well beyond the power of speech. Everything he wanted to say was right there in her gaze, reflected back at him, and for the first time in his life, he was outside the need for words.

There was only the feel of her atop him, rousing the ghosts of countless past dreams; her mouth, hot and wet; the silk of her skin, flush against his; his limbs entangled with hers. He knew every inch of her. And at the end, the celestial completion, with a murmur and a sigh, her breath in his ear, all of her love and devotion carried on one simple word: *Gideon.*

–

The berth was hardly big enough for one person, but they both lay in it, and gladly, arms and legs wrapped around each other, talking and laughing and murmuring late into the indigo night. The ship swayed beneath them, the waves lapped at the hull, and in the space of their tiny bunk in their little cabin, they were happy.

"I don't think you're digging the hole properly."

Gideon leaned on his shovel, and sent his wife an exasperated look. "And when is the last time you dug a hole?"

"I never have, as you know, but it says here in the book – "

"I don't need a book to dig a hole, my dear." With that he turned back to his task, applying his considerable strength to digging up the root ball of her mother's oldest rose bush.

Thea hid her smile behind the very large copy of *Codswill's Guide to Growing Roses*. She sat comfortably ensconced on a soft chaise under the warm sun as Gideon worked, offering sporadic advice and opinions as he tried to remove the rose. Her efforts were not for any lack of direction on Gideon's part, but rather for the sheer contrary pleasure of pestering him. The greatest joy in it came from his utter ignorance of her motives. She watched him struggle to keep his patience with her as she struggled not to laugh.

She enjoyed watching him, for he was handsome and strong, and not afraid of the physical labor. She waited until he worked up a good sweat and had fully wedged the shovel under the plant. "Gideon, dear, it does say in the book to dig in a circle – are you sure that is what you are doing?"

He paused and shot her a cross look. "Would you like to do it?"

"I could try," she replied in tones of feigned long-suffering. "Though I doubt I could even see the shovel." She looked at the bulge of her enormous belly and then batted her eyes back at Gideon.

He frowned as understanding dawned, and then just as quickly threw his head back and laughed. Tossing down the shovel, he reached her in three strides, and planted a sweaty kiss on her lips.

"Salty," Thea laughingly said, and then gave him an apologetic kiss on the forehead. "You are too easy."

"You are too wicked."

"My condition is making me mischievous."

He touched her belly with a gentle hand; Thea did not care about the smear of dirt he left on her gown as he did so. She loved the way his eyes turned tender when he looked at her growing stomach, loved his unveiled exuberance at their child's arrival.

"Perhaps we should call her Rose," he said.

"How awful to go through life called Rose Birch." Gideon joined in her laughter.

"We could call her May."

"We shall have some of my mother's roses; they will be enough memento of the past. Let us give the baby a name for the future."

He nodded and looked up at her. Thea's hand lifted to trace the thin white line of his scar, not yet grown complacent at having him so near, and so completely hers. She touched him whenever she could, simply because she could.

He pressed a kiss into the palm of her hand. "I've dug out the rose. Are you ready to go?"

Thea looked around at the traces of her mother's rose garden, at the house they would sell, the house where her parents had died, where Agatha had died.

"Yes," she answered, looking back into his blue eyes, and the love that shone there. "Yes, I am."

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Susanna Malcolm has been reading romance since she was far too young to be doing so. She lives near Chicago with her family and no pets, although there are rabbits in the yard.

Visit her at:
www.SusannaMalcolm.com
@SusannaMalcolm
Facebook.com/SusannaMalcolmAuthor

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